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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

SELF DECONSTRUCTING LYRIC:
COLERIDGE, DICKINSON, WILLIAMS and WEBB

BY

RAY WILTON

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta

SPRING 1994

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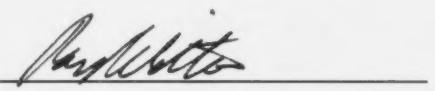

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled SELF DECONSTRUCTING LYRIC: COLERIDGE, DICKINSON, WILLIAMS, WEBB here submitted by RAY WILTON in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

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...for Donna

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the most often asked question in the study of lyric poetry has been "Who is speaking here?" Within that question are a number of assumptions that recent literary theory challenges: the assumption that speech flows unproblematically from an origin within the speaker; the assumption that speakers can and do represent themselves fully and coherently within their speech; the assumption that lyric texts imitate 'real' speech. In recent years all these assumptions have become increasingly untenable. Roland Barthes' sceptical materialism, for example, seriously challenges those assumptions, but more importantly, challenges the credibility of lyric itself.

However, lyric may be more adaptable than is generally assumed. The inclination to define it, essentially to define it out of existence, may be a residual effect of the romanticization of the lyric. That is, the assumption that we can reveal lyric's essence smacks of the Romantics' assumption of an essential "I." Perhaps as our conceptual framework shifts in regards to the constitution of the "I," so too must our conception of lyric. The thesis aims to show that such a shift is in fact happening in contemporary poetics. Reading that shift, however, necessitates a prior re-reading of Romantic lyric in order to separate the genre from its particular manifestation within Romantic ideology.

Following an introductory chapter which surveys contemporary theorizing of the subject and lyric, the thesis attempts to drive that wedge between Romantic ideology and lyric, by revealing that in spite of the best Romantic efforts to establish a continuity between what Benveniste calls enunciation and the enunciated, the attempt does not work except through a kind of mystification of the issue. Coleridge, who painstakingly sought to overcome the mystery, actually reveals the rift. An analysis of Emily Dickinson's poetry serves to bring into sharper focus the failure to establish that continuity. William Carlos Williams is discussed as attempting to wrestle lyric from the grip of Romantic ideology, and succeeding to the extent that he opens the way for his successors to adapt the genre to a materialist ideology. This leads to the poetry of Phyllis Webb who, following in the tradition of the others, develops a lyric form that assumes Barthian scepticism.

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I am also grateful to Shirley Neuman and Jim Mulvihill, whose comments and questions during the final stages helped me to clear up some of my confusion. I also appreciate the time and effort given by Ted Blodgett and Bert Almon. Robert Kroetsch helped me to imagine what I would have liked this thesis to be, and what in another form it may become.

I would like to thank Dennis Cooley, whose support and enthusiasm set me on this path to begin with, and whose continued faith, even in my darkest hours, often astonished me.

I thank my parents for their occasional assistance in financing this project. And Greg, my brother, for listening over Sunday morning coffees while I tried to come to grips with the complexities of the lyric subject.

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Introduction

"How can we know the dancer from the dance?"
(W. B. Yeats, "Among School Children"
Selected Poetry 131)

"I know these are only words, but all the same..."
(Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text 47)

"As soon as
I speak, I
speaks."
(Robert Creeley, "The Pattern" Collected Poems 284)

"Who is speaking here?" Roland Barthes asks of Balzac's Sarrasine (S/Z 140). He concludes the question is unanswerable, that in fact it is the nature of writing to keep the question from ever being answered. If Barthes is right, then it would seem that the lyric is in real trouble. For instance, I was once enrolled in a graduate seminar where the practice of studying the lyric almost invariably began with "Who is speaking here?" to which students were expected to respond with a description of a person who might say≤983Xsuch thing. What kind of person would speak like this in this

situation? It did not seem to occur to anyone that nobody would wake up and say "Busy Old fool, unruly sun." Nevertheless, responses were evaluated on the basis of textual evidence, and the overriding assumption throughout was that an identifiable and internally coherent speaker was the source of the utterance. Lyric was personal utterance overheard, as John Stuart Mill had understood it. Or as Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues, lyric was what "one might say" (Poetic Closure 16). In that graduate seminar, and in the criticism of the lyric as it has been traditionally done, establishing the identity of the speaker, the nuances of feeling or intellect (i.e. personality) ascribed to him or her, has been the ultimate goal. Lyric competence has been judged on the basis of the immediacy or presence of that feeling or intellect. Barthes's skeptical materialism seriously challenges the credibility of such an approach, but more importantly, challenges the credibility of lyric itself.

"It is language which speaks, not the author,"[1] Barthes writes in "The Death of the Author" (Rustle of Language 49).

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[1] Barthes employs the term "author" here in a special way. In his use, and in Michel Foucault's sense of the term (see pages 10-11), the term refers to the representation of the author in the text, the speaker who expresses him or herself, and not the actual writer. Or at least the two are not to be misconstrued as the same. This, I hope to show, is a distinction which will prove crucial in the renewal of the lyric form.

To "write is to reach... that point where not "I" but only language functions, 'performs'." To answer the question "Who is speaking?" in a text "is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing." He goes on to say that traditionally once the author is found, the text is explained, "the critic has won." Hence, "it is hardly surprising that historically the Author's empire has been the critic's as well, and also that (even new) criticism is today unsettled at the same time as the Author." The question for lyric studies is: is the death of the author also the death of the lyric? The fortunes of both would seem inextricably linked. How can lyric as we understand it survive under the pressure of a skepticism that asserts

> writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, of observation, of representation, of "painting" (as the Classics used to say), but instead what the linguists, following Oxfordian philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form (exclusively found in the first person and in the present), in which the speech-act has no other content (no other statement) than the act by which it is uttered: something like the I declare of kings and the I sing of the earliest poets ... (Rustle of Language 52)

If the "I" refers to nothing beyond the text in which it is written, refers to no origin, then a basic impetus behind the lyric as we understand it, and as we interpret it, is called

into question. Presuming to answer the question "Who is speaking?" is to ignore the way the text actually works, to ignore the textual evidence, you might say.

According to Marjorie Perloff, we can no longer afford to deny this evidence. If poetry is to survive, we must make a distinction between poetry and the narrower genre of lyric. Citing a symposium on "The Place of Poetry" in our time, Perloff challenges the assumption generally held there, namely that poetry means lyric.

> Poetry, then, means lyric, and by lyric, Clausen evidently refers to a short utterance (or sequence of utterances) in which a single speaker expresses, in figurative language, his subjective vision of "the truths of moments, situations, relationships," a vision culminating in a "unique insight" or epiphany that unites poet and reader (Dance of the Intellect 173-4).

The difficulty she finds with this conception of poetry seems primarily to derive from its insular "I", an "I" dissociated from the world. She recognizes the romantic source of this form of poetry, but rather than lamenting a world where such poetry is no longer valued, or bemoaning the state of cultural decline, she suggests the form and the culture to which it belongs have run their course, and a new form for a new time should be, and is, emerging.

> Romantic lyric, the poem as expression of a moment of absolute insight, of emotion crystallized into a timeless

> pattern, gives way to a poetry that can, once again, accommodate narrative and didacticism, the serious and comic, verse and prose. It does not need to be the enemy of "science" as Clausen believes, for it seeks to incorporate the "computer language" of which Clausen is so contemptuous into the lyric fabric. Indeed, we are now witnessing, at least in America, an interesting phenomenon. Minor poets continue to write neo-Romantic lyric; in this context, the attack on television and the media as the enemy can be seen to be a kind of defensive nostalgia. At the same time, a new poetry is emerging that wants to open the field so as to make contact with the world as well as the word (181).

The identification of the lyric with this insular "I" has become commonplace. Dennis Cooley speaks of poems which "find their endorsement in the lyrical 'I' which watches over them and in them. This "I" is for the most part contemplative, inward, emotive, sensitive, private." (Vernacular Muse 7). Robert Kroetsch speaks of "fierce lyric closure" in his essay "For Play and Entrance" and seeks an escape in the long poem (Lovely Treachery of Words 118), while Douglas Barbour considers the possibilities of "anti-lyric," poetry which works against that insularity ("Lyric/Anti-Lyric: Some Notes about a Concept"). In all cases, as Jonathan Ayerbach says of many of the essays collected in Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism, a particular definition of lyric gets "set up only

to be devalued or rejected" (Hosek and Parker 352). But what is under attack here might be seen as an especially Romantic version of lyric -- not the lyrical "I" but the Romantic "I" -- isolated, lonely as a cloud, transcendent; an "I" that through an epiphanic moment, uniting poet and reader, gains presence. But what exactly we are in the presence of becomes the question, or begs the question. It seems, under the pressure of renewed skepticism, that we are no longer willing to "suspend disbelief" as Coleridge would have us do, and accept that we are in the presence of a speaker, but rather we, in the words of Robert Kroetsch, "must honour our disbelief in belief" (118). But does honouring our disbelief in belief necessarily preclude lyric?

It would seem to preclude much of the lyric poetry written in the past two centuries, or maybe even last three centuries, but not, I think, all. And this is what I will attempt to show in the chapters that follow. But neither would "honouring our disbelief" preclude a lot of lyric poetry written prior to that. For instance, when Philip Sydney adopts his muse's advice to "look in thy heart and write," he knows he is employing a standard lyric convention. This supposed real speaker is a regular feature of the songs and sonnets of the period, a feature that proved rich in poetic possibility. But, as in Sidney's "Astrophil and Stella," the issue is not "subjective vision" or "the truths of moments" but the concealing of artifice behind the appearance of

reality; the skill involved concerns poetic technique rather than "expression," and that skill is an important feature of the poem. The skill is in being the master of illusion, at least as much as in the ability to actually transcribe or capture the workings of the human heart. So we are not asked to suspend disbelief, but rather to recognize that disbelief, and so also the play of convention, as a large part of the pleasure we derive from the poem.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith's understanding of lyric would seem better able to take into account the difference between the kind of lyric Perloff describes and the kind of lyric we find in the Renaissance. According to her, disbelief is an essential of poetic (by which she means lyric) discourse. In her book, Poetic Closure, she differentiates between literary and non-literary discourse on the basis of a distinction between fictional and historical utterance. This enables her to conceive of "a poem as the imitation or representation of an utterance."

> Even when the poem is occasioned by the poet's actual experiences and is most nearly a transcription of his individual "voice," it remains, as a poem, only a possible utterance, what the poet might say. Although the revelation and articulation of that possibility may be one source of the poet's most compelling claim upon our interests and emotions, nevertheless the claim is not the same as that made upon us by one who addresses us

> directly, his discourse directly shaped by the pressures of an immediate or "historical" occasion. (16).

Smith develops this theme further in On the Margins of Discourse. The historical (natural) utterance/ fictional utterance dichotomy distinguishes the lyric poem from the personal letter, for example, which depends upon a shared set of referents between the author and reader that make the letter's import historically determined. Smith claims that the lyric imitates this kind of personal communication, but that the deictics become generalized and variable, produced by the reader in confronting the text, and have no referentiality beyond the text.

Smith's account of that "most compelling" attribute of some poems, the possibility of their being "most nearly a transcription of [the poet's] individual voice," suggests nicely the kind of play we find in Renaissance lyric, but proves much weaker when applied to Romantic poetics. What distinguishes Romantic lyric is the absence of play, the earnestness with which it asserts the "I". Not only does disbelief cease to serve a function in the Romantic poem, but is actually contrary to Romantic poetics, as any number of poems from the period will show. We need only look to the popular practice of specifically dating and locating the occasion of utterance in Romantic poetry.[2]

---

[2] Antony Easthope suggests the quality I allude to here in a discussion of "expressionism" in Romantic poetry. "The

What becomes clear in studying examples from different periods, is that the relation between lyric speakers and actual speakers is a highly problematic one, but nevertheless in all discussions involving lyric some relation is assumed. For Smith the relation is a mimetic one, but the question remains what or who exactly is being imitated. If lyric is what "one might say" then who is this one? It is generally assumed that lyric answers that question, which is the problem Perloff has with it. Or more precisely, the problem is a general assumption that speakers are revealed in their speech. That assumption is now undergoing much closer examination.

Jonathan Culler, in his essay "Changes in the Study of the Lyric" (Hosek and Parker 38 - 54), compares Cleanth Brooks's and Paul de Man's readings of Yeats's "Among School Children." For Brooks, Yeats's concluding question, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?", is rhetorical, and the implied answer is, of course, that we cannot. That means, in the context of the poem, that we cannot tell the "I" speaking from the "I" spoken. For Brooks, this is the essence of

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difference between traditional iconicity and Romantic expressiveness can be related to that between realism and naturalism. A realist theatre imitates everyday reality but is consciously played 'to' the audience by actors very much aware of its existence (e.g. Congreve's The Way of the World). Naturalist theatre would deny the existence of the audience altogether and treat the proscenium arch as transparent 'fourth wall' through which the uninvited audience peeps" (131).

lyricism -- the "actualization" of an invisible spiritual or intellectual phenomenon. De Man, on the other hand, suggests we might take the question seriously, as truly seeking an answer. That reading opens the distinction between the "I" speaking and the "I" that is spoken. The dance is what we know, but it is not the dancer. It is rather a figurative representation of the dancer, and in de Man's reading the poem brings into question this figuration. For Brooks the poem answers its own question, and teaches us through its own concretization of voice, the validity of that answer. The poem congeals into a closed, self-affirming structure, a tautology, which de Man re-opens by positing a disjunction between the "I" speaking and the "I" that is spoken. De Man not only questions Brooks's assumption that speakers are revealed in their speech, but shows that assumption to be the fundamental impetus behind lyric closure. Perhaps, then, lyric closure is less an attribute of the genre itself, and more an imposition of an ideological climate on its production and recitation, an ideological climate which is now being seriously challenged.

One such questioning of the ideology that demands lyric closure is performed by Michel Foucault in his essay "What is an Author?" Historicizing the concept of author, Foucault attempts to shift the emphasis away from the assumption of the author as creative source to what he calls the author-function. He means by this author-function how the concept of

author operates within the interpretive act, and suggests directions for the analysis of this function. He writes, "perhaps the time has come to study not only the expressive value and formal transformations of discourse, but its mode of existence."

> A typology of this sort cannot be adequately understood in relation to the grammatical features, formal structures, and objects of discourse, because there undoubtedly exist specific discursive properties or relationships that are irreducible to the rules of grammar and logic and to the laws that govern objects. (Language, Counter-Memory, Practice 137)

Foucault, by showing the historical determination of the concept of author, neatly opens the way to reformulating the question.

> But the subject should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies. We should suspend the typical questions: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what

> functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse. (137-8)

Foucault's re-reading of the subject as a function of discourse rather than an origin coincides with Barthes s{epticism as well as with de Man's reading of Yeats. It would seem that the lyric speaker too must be "stripped of its creative role," for the role of speakers must go the way of authors, and cease to be understood as the origin of their speech.

The way the subject functions in disccurse has been addressed in various fields by the likes of Saussure, Benveniste, Jakobson and Lacan. Numerous interpretations and syntheses of their works already exist,[3] so brief attention to a few especially pertinent aspects will suffice here. Of special relevance is Saussure's distinction between two axes in the operation of language: the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. The paradigmatic (vertical) axis constitutes all the possible word selections for a given place in the

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[3] See for example, Kaja Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), or Paul Smith Discerning the Subject (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) or Antony Easthope, Poetry as Discourse (New York: Methuen, 1983) or Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice (New York: Methuen & Co., 1980).

syntagmatic (horizontal) axis. The selection of a particular word calls up a host of other possible choices, choices made possible through associations determined culturally, socially, linguistically and psychologically, that are excluded. Hence, meaning coheres along the syntagmatic axis through a process of exclusion, clearing a kind of path. The continuity along the syntagmatic axis that sustains meaning we call the "subject", which is itself sustained by that meaning. Antony Easthope elaborates on this point:

> Meaning "insists" along the syntagmatic axis, and so the attempt to close meaning along the axis offers a coherent position to the subject as "a single voice" sustaining meaning and itself sustained in "this linearity." (69)

Subject and meaning are mutually sustaining categories.

Emile Benveniste has made much of this linguistic subject, arguing that discourse depends upon its production. It is not to be confused with the "feeling everyone experiences of being himself," but rather is defined as "the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness" (Problems in General Linguistics 224). This subjectivity is indicated by the "shifters" or "deictics" of person, and these pronouns are very "strange" indeed.

> There is no concept "I" that incorporates all the "I"s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all

> speakers, in the sense that there is a concept "tree" to which all individual uses of tree refer. (226)

At another point Benveniste claims "'I' can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone" (218).[4] So "I" refers then to the syntagmatic continuity of discourse: "The reality to which it refers is the reality of discourse" (226).

He goes on, however, to identify a "combined double instance in this process: "the instance of "I" as referent and the instance of discourse containing "I" as referee." "I" is both speaking and spoken. Mutually dependent, but never resolvable to the same, these double instances constitute the linguistic subject. The speaking subject designates the production of discourse while the spoken subject designates what is produced within discourse.

This distinction is of special relevance to lyric study

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[4] This point is of particular significance. Benveniste goes on to discuss the importance of verb tense to the production of the linguistic subject, specifically how all verb tenses are relative to the "instance of discourse." "Language is accordingly the possibility of subjectivity because it always contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and discourse provokes the emergence of subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. In some way language puts forth 'empty' forms which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to himself and which he relates to his 'person.'" (Benveniste, 227)

because lyric, as it is traditionally understood, amounts to a reduction of the two instances of discourse to the same: the spoken "I" is the speaking "I". This provides the speaking "I" with the continuity and stability of the spoken "I" (i.e. a form), but at a significant cost. The speaking "I" gets determined by syntagmatic relations, gaining permanence but at the expense of agency. Or more specifically, it sacrifices agency for the appearance of it, for the illusion of a stable identity that the spoken "I" offers. Only through concealing the actual production of discourse is this determinacy possible.

By the "actual production of discourse" I refer back to Saussure's axes, and the process of exclusion that clears the path of syntagmatic relations. All that is excluded in the maintenance of the path gets posited as "other," as absent. The important point for our purposes with regard to this by now familiar theory is that the choices get determined by forces external to the conscious ego. Choices are made in accordance with a path developing from previous word choices, as well as by associations along the paradigmatic axis that in turn set the course of the syntagmatic line. That is, that which is excluded plays a significant role in the development of meaning or subjectivity. In the terms of psychoanalysis, that which is excluded constitutes the unconscious: or as Lacan puts it "the unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the other" (Ecrits, 55). Rather than a stable source of

discourse, a source of the speaking subject, the spoken subject reveals itself as a linguistic effect, rendered possible only through the concealment of its own production [*p729Y

precisely such terms.

> The principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry, depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice. Our claim to understand a lyric coincides with the actualization of a speaking voice... Since this voice is in no circumstance immediately available as an actual, sensory experience, the poetic labour that is to make it manifest can take several forms and adopt a variety of strategies. No matter what approach is taken it is essential that the status of the voice not be reduced to being a mere figure of speech or play of the letter, for this would deprive it of the attribute of aesthetic presence that determines the hermeneutics of the lyric. ("Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory" Hosek and Parker 55)

It is this production which Barthes seeks to open up, removing from the spoken subject the status of "author" and, to use Foucault's term, applying the concept of "author function." Barthes calls us awake from our illusion, or rather alerts us to the fact that we are dreaming. But instead of impoverishing the lyric, as one might expect, his skepticism might actually revitalize it.

Clearly, if lyric depends upon the concealment of its production, then our awareness of that production will render it implausible. Likewise, if lyric is, as Perloff claims, the expression of an epiphanic moment that unites poet and reader, then our skepticism regarding expression -- never mind epiphanic moments -- will strain the credibility of the union.[5] But David Lindley, for one, in his overview of the genre, warns us against defining lyric too narrowly, stating that "the notion poets and readers have of lyric genres is profoundly affected by fluctuations in systems of classification and poetic practice through history" (Lyric 5). And Brenda Carr, in developing an interesting theory of the genre, argues that "genre theory must shift to accommodate the critical difference of each recitation of genre" ("Genre Theory and the Impasse of Lyric" 77).

Yet it seems clear that what Perloff and others point to is an identifiable phenomenon within the lyric genre, and it

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[5] See also Sharon Cameron's Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre: "But as the present is neither the past nor the future, as desire is not equivalent to the object of its longing, as there is a space predicated between the landscape and the human subject who regards it, between language and what it hopes to word into being, so the same radical inequality is manifested between lyric speech and the voice it represents" (207). Cameron sees the lyric enterprise as essentially an attempt to reduce all voices into one voice and all time into the present, in other words, as an impossible pursuit.

is what we commonly refer to when we use the term. But then perhaps it is no accident that lyricism gets defined as essence -- that is, that critics point to an essential lyric form -- for the lyric we speak of here is itself the belief in essence revealed. And as Bakhtin tells us, pure genre is a closed form, free of impurities and dissension. Pure lyric is thus lyricism revealed.[6] Perhaps Perloff might better have titled her essay "the impasse of genre."[7] In other words the impasse she cites has more to do with the impasse of pure genre, genre that reveals only itself, and so removes itself from everyday discourse and the world.[8] The point is that

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[6] Perloff's desire for contact "with the world as well as the word" could be understood as impossible in any pure genre, according to Mikhail Bakhtin. "In other genres [other than the novel] (the drama, the lyric and the their variants) the most contiguous possible position of the author, the point-of-view necessary to the shaping of the material, is dictated by the genre itself" (Dialogic Imagination 16).

[7] As Perloff herself says, the new poetry she envisages incorporates "the 'computer language' of which Clausen is so contemptuous into the lyric fabric" (my italics, 181).

[8] See Bakhtin: "I see myself through the eyes of another. This coincidence of form -- the view of myself I have of myself as self, and the view I have of myself as other -- bears an integral, and therefore naive, character -- there is no gap between the two. We have as yet no confession, no exposing of self. The one doing the depicting coincides with the one being depicted"..."Neither an epic nor a tragic hero could ever step out of his own character during a pause in the plot or during an intermission: he has no face for it, no

pure lyric, or pure anything for that matter, is by definition out of this world.[9]

Lyric may be more adaptable than is generally assumed. The inclination to define it, essentially to define it out of existence, may be a residual effect of the romanticization of the lyric. That is, the assumption that we can reveal lyric's essence smacks of the Romantics' assumption of an essential "I." Perhaps as our conceptual framework shifts in regards to the constitution of the "I," so too must our conception of lyric. My intention is to show that such a shift is in fact happening in contemporary poetics. Reading that shift, however, necessitates a prior re-reading of Romantic lyric in order to separate the genre from its particular manifestation within Romantic ideology.

What follows then is just that. Chapter One attempts to drive that wedge between Romantic ideology and lyric, by revealing that in spite of the best Romantic efforts to establish a continuity between enunciation and the enunciated, the attempt does not work except through a kind of

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gesture, no language" (34).

[9] Bakhtin describes all high genres (tragedy, epic, lyric) as "structured in the zone of the distanced image, a zone outside any possible contact with the present in all its openendedness" (19). On the other hand "the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)" (7).

mystification of the issue. Coleridge, who painstakingly sought to overcome the mystery, actually reveals (Chapter Two) the rift. In Chapter Three an analysis of Emily Dickinson's poetry serves to bring into sharper focus the failure to establish that continuity. In Chapter Four, William Carlos Williams will be discussed as attempting to wrestle lyric from the grip of Romantic ideology, and succeeding to the extent that he opens the way for his successors to adapt the genre to a materialist ideology. This leads to Chapter Five and the poetry of Phyllis Webb who, following in the tradition of the others, develops a lyric form that assumes Barthian skepticism.

Coleridge's inability to convincingly establish the continuity between enunciation and the enunciated raised doubts in him that are evident in his poetry. This, I believe, is a characte2istic of lyric that contemporary poetics exploits. That doubt plaguing Coleridge's production of a poetics of inclusion disrupts his attempts at closure. That doubt, I will argue, arises from the lyric evocation of what is outside it, an evocation that actually precludes closure. Lyric attempts to escape the ideology within which it is cast; but even that statement is of course necessarily ideological as well, which means any conclusion about the genre must be tentative and in process.

One more point, actually a disclaimer, needs to be made. The actual poems selected for analysis here are relatively

few. They are not intended to be representative of their authors' work as a whole, or for that matter of lyric poetry generally, nor are they intended to be understood as the origins of the changes in lyric which have occurred over the past two hundred years. They do, however, clearly reveal those changes, and that is the main reason they have been selected for analysis. Furthermore, I believe, the poems selected reveal a coherent pattern of development, the rise perhaps of a characteristic of lyric form generally overlooked but in recent years growing increasingly insistent, namely lyric indeterminacy.

Chapter One

Seeking Origins: The Romantic Moment

> And not alone
> 'Mid gloom and tumult, but no less 'mid fair
> And tranquil scenes, that universal power
> And fitness in the latent qualities
> And essences of things, by which the mind
> Is moved by feelings of delight, to me
> Came strengthened with a superadded soul,
> A virtue not its own.
> (Wordsworth, The Prelude 1805, II.341 - 348)

> "The simplicity and naturalness is his own, and not imitated... I cannot attain this innocent nakedness, except by assumption."
> (Coleridge, Letters 1:#225)

Whether we define lyricism as the "phenomenalization of voice" (de Man, "Lyrical Voice" 55) or the reduction of all voices to the one or all time to the eternal now (Cameron

Lyric Time 207), or as a "subjective vision of 'the truths of moments, situations, relationships,' a vision culminating in a 'unique insight' or epiphany that unites poet and reader" (Perloff, "Impasse of Lyric" 174), or like J. S. Mill define it as personal utterance overheard, it seems clear that our usual conception of lyric, if not exactly originating in the Romantic period, shares much with that period's understanding of the genre. This makes the Romantic period an especially useful site for beginning an interrogation of lyricism. For it is within Romanticism that the lyric impulse thus defined becomes not a function of the poem, but the whole poetic enterprize. And as Culler says, "nothing need happen in an apostrophic poem, as the great Romantic odes amply demonstrate. Nothing need happen because the poem itself is to be the happening" (Pursuit of Signs 149). As I will argue, the Romantics appear to have isolated a particular aspect of lyric, and attempted to naturalize it through an elision of linguistic and psychological subjects. What happens is that rather than producing "natural speech," as they claim to do, they ascribe naturalness to a particular lyrical form of subjectivity.

Of course, this was not uniformly done. The differences between the poetics of even Wordsworth and Coleridge are notable, and one particular difference is generally overlooked. While they both share, as do Romantic lyric poets generally, a preoccupation with the speaking voice and its

continuity with the consciousness behind it, it was Coleridge, I will argue, who most thoroughly explored this problematic, Wordsworth being more content to simply master the lyric convention rather than probe its mystery. It was Coleridge who argued that the unique mind of the poet was the origin of great poetry. For Wordsworth the origin of the "I" speaking is in the voice of the "bard"; for Coleridge the voice of the "bard" originates in the "I" who speaks. The difference connotes opposing passive and active conceptions of lyricism, an opposition that becomes especially important for later, women writers such as Emily Dickinson and Phyllis Webb, as well as for writers marginalized not by gender, but geography and culture, such as William Carlos Williams.

While our current reading of lyric, particularly lyric as "phenomenalization of voice," can no more be said to have originated in Coleridge and Wordsworth than romanticism itself can (such a claim for a stable origin would in fact be very Romantic), addressing the difference between their respective poetics exposes vividly the process of naturalization a particular form of lyric subjectivity has undergone. As well, this process may be seen in the anxieties experienced by other writers of the period, which is the point I will attempt to make first. In all cases, as we shall see, a concern with legitimizing the lyric voice through a revelation of its natural origin is evident.

I

A poem written by a friend of Coleridge's, George Dyer, and published in a small selection called Poems in 1792,[10] clearly exposes, through its own weaknesses, the problematic that so preoccupied the period. The poem works obviously within a familiar poetic code whereby the speaker rejects artifice and asserts the poem's origin in reality. The curious thing about this poem is that it assumes its own artifice and therefore rejects itself, while lamenting the impossibility of naturalness. The poem begins by admiring the artifice of the classical lyric, but expressing a stronger sympathy with nature.

Though much I love th'Aeolian lyre,
Whose varying sounds beguil'd my youthful day;
And still inventive fancy loves to stray
In fabled groves among th'Aonian quire;
Yet when fair nature's volume open lies,
And heav'nly truth pours forth its sacred night,
My song forbears -- for let the sun but rise,

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[10] This book may not be readily available, but it can be found in the Robartes Library, University of Toronto. In spite of its obscurity, I would argue its relevance here for two reasons. One is that George Dyer was a close associate of Coleridge in the early 1790's, and so we might possibly assume some sharing of interests and poetic concerns. But also. and more importantly, the poem exemplifies in a very transparent way the period's preoccupation with the "natural."

What are the glimmering stars that cheer'd the lonesome night?

Dyer compares his poetic "song" with "nature's volume" and finds his song much lacking. His poetry fades before nature's "sacred light," like a star at sunrise. He rejects the imitation of the classics: "I bid farewell to classic ground; / Ye endless labyrinths of song, adieu," and turns his attention to natural beauty for his inspiration:

Yet oh, sweet rose, fair child of May!
Though Bacchus ne'er with thee his brow shall wreath;
Ye tender myrtles! though ye ne'er shall breathe
On the soft couch that wak'd to am'rous play:
Yet will I steal frvm you the richest sweet,
Yet shall your beauties wake no vulgar strain;
Each wild note shall some kindred passion meet,
And not a gale that sighs, shall sigh to me in vain.

Indirectly, however, his meaning arises out of the negation of literary convention; his "song" is strewn with classical allusions which, just in case we should miss them, are documented with footnotes. Nature is something other than poetry, something superior, and absent, which can only be alluded to by the poem's negation of itself. The poem's claim to anything higher than mere imitation of the classics lies in its inspiration arising out of contemplating nature.

Hail! light divine -- oh! may I meet thy beams,
Spring up and sing, and glow with living fire;

But, if the lyre without enchanted themes
Must sleep -- ah, then for ever sleep, false feeble lyre!

The poet's passion, the "living fire" of poetic inspiration, embodied in an artificial creation, built out of poetic conven4ion, constitutes the poem's truth.

The "living fire" is in the poet. The poet receives the inspiration from nature and works it up into poetry, something other. A problem arises within this formula when we realize that the poet himself is a literary convention. In the tradition of the ode, Dyer addresses himself directly to the source of his inspiration: "Yet oh, sweet rose, fair child of May!" Such familiar expressions are an established fiction that we accept without question; the fictional "I" of the poem is a literary convention not to be confused with the empirical "I", George Dyer, of course. In turn, this reflects on the inspiration itself, transforming it into a literary convention as familiar as the poetic muse or divine inspiration. The poem wholly separates itself from nature, and exposes itself as an artifice that can only translate nature into its own terms.

Dyer's lament for an absent "naturalness" brings into focus a preoccupation of his time. The argument of the poem, that God's creation inspires an imitation that can never be more than that, highlighting the inferiority of the imitation (albeit not intentionally), through the poem's ownclumsy and

worn employment of the appropriate conventions, exposes the exhaustion of the literary tradition to which it belongs, as well as the need for a revitalization of poetic form. Proximity to nature becomes the focus of that renewal, as we find in the work of another contemporary, William Cowper.

"The Task" to some extent attempts to close the chasm between nature and its poetic representation through adoption of seemingly "natural" voice in blank verse. Its length alone would seem to preclude calling the poem lyric, as does its preoccupation with an external reality. Yet its familiar, unaffected tone, its sense of a real person speaking, most influenced the likes of Coleridge and Wordsworth.[11] Nevertheless it is interesting to note what was left out of this influence, what was not taken up by those within Cowper's influence, namely the poem's (and the speaker's) reliance upon a external and verifiable nature for legitimacy.[12]

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[11] See, for instance, Humphrey House's Coleridge: The Clark Lectures 1951-52 or Ann Matheson's "The Influence of Cowper's The Task on Coleridge's Conversation Poems."

[12] Coleridge cites William Cowper and William Lisle Bowles as the first to combine natural thoughts with natural diction, head with heart. Yet, although he admires Cowper, he interestingly enough places his work amongst the lower orders of poetry, apparently because of his religious convictions (Biographia Literaria 25n). Coleridge's problems with Cowper's passive stance is consistant with his dispute with Hartlean associative theory, where he claims association to be a product of fancy, a passive mental activity, whereas

> Happy who walks with him! whom what he finds
> Of flavour or of scent in fruit or flow'r,
> Or what he views of beautiful or grand
> In nature, from the broad majestic oak
> To the green blade that twinkles in the sun,
> Prompts with remembrance of a present God!
> His presence, who made all so fair, perceiv'd,
> Makes all still fairer. (VI.247-54)

The passage belongs to a section in the poem which opposes the view that nature is simply a machine, and argues that the "beautiful" and "grand" inspire the awareness of the creator's presence in nature, and when that presence is perceived nature is made "still fairer." Yet God is not actually perceived, but rather his presence is deduced from the evidence. Cowper bases his faith upon external proof rather than an actual felt presence, or in other words, the felt presence gains legitimacy through reason.

Furthermore, nature itself analogically supplies the means of proving the creator's existence; in its forms and processes it embodies the rationality used in the deduction:

> Though winter had been none, had man been true,
> And earth be punish'd for its tenant's sake,
> Yet not in vengeance; as this smiling sky,
> So soon succeeding such an angry night,

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imagination is the gift of the true poet, the power of giving form, which Cowper's poetic lacks.

> And these dissolving snows, and this clear stream
> Recov'ring fast its liquid music, prove.
> (VI.256-61)

The logic which explains the fallen world is intrinsically contained in the processes of nature. Cowper's argument gains objectivity by appearing merely to observe the processes of nature. Nature serves as a sacred text that teaches not only spiritual truth, but the necessary means to reading that text correctly so as to arrive at that truth. The meaning of nature, the text, is fixed and absolute, and available to those open to receiving the lesson.

The parallel evoked between the text of nature and the text of the poem becomes more interesting when we note the limited role attributed to the speaker or reader in the poem's text. Both speaker and reader serve reason; reason legitimates the speaking voice in the poem, and so provides its persuasiveness. The chatty persona's humble posturing is a necessary attribute, integral to the poem, as it opens the speaker to receiving the lesson, enabling him to accept the indisputable evidence. But as such, the speaker also reveals himself to be a mere slate on which reason is written. Even the creativity that makes the "fair still fairer" is gained from outside, from giving oneself up to nature's logic. The stability and meaning of the text of nature is placed firmly in the text itself, and may be understood as God's manifestation in the world, which the speaker receives into

his life. The legitimacy of the speaker is dependent upon adherence to reason, and not any intrinsic quality of the speaker himself.

Although many in the late 1700's shared Cowper's vision of a stable text of nature, an opposing point of view also presented itself. In the poem "Monody, Written at Matlock," William Lisle Bowles reads the text of nature very differently, relinquishing the notion of a fixed external reality and thereby the certainty Cowper claims. The River Derwent speaks to him, but he interprets that speech subjectively.

> To me, it seems to tell the pensive tale
> Of spring-time, and the summer days all flown;
> And while sad autumn's voice ev'n now I hear...
>
> (62.26-28)

> I think of poor Humanity's brief day,
> How fast its blossoms fade, its summers speed away! (62.33-34)

Bowles finds an analogy in nature, but unlike Cowper does not assert its external validity. He makes clear that it is a subjective construct, one of his own making. Furthermore, it is not a spiritual truth he finds here, no intimations of the creator, but the awareness that all in life is transient: the passing of the seasons relates to humanity's passing through the world. In fact, the poem as a whole speaks the ephemeral

quality of life and nature: "the scenes that smile in light arrayed / But catch the sense, and then in darkness fade" (63.47-48).

For Bowles, God is not inferred from the forms of nature, but simply assumed, existing somewhere beyond the world of growth and decay: "HIM, who sits sublime / Above the clouds of this tempestuous clime, / Its stir and strife . . . " (64.95-97). This results in a distancing from the eternal and a closer affinity with the temporal. That affinity is self-consciously subjective, lacking a sense of certainty; there remains only a process that finally becomes a source of joy in itself:

> Though brief the time and short our course to run,
> Derwent! amid the scenes that deck thy side,
> Ere yet the parting paths of life divide,
> Let us rejoice, seeking what may be won
> From the laborious day, or fortune's frown:
> Here may we, ere the sun of life goes down,
> A while regardless of the morrow, dwell;
> Then to our destined roads, and speed us well!
>
> (66-67.171-78)

In Cowper the concept of a fixed perception of reality enables a sense of certainty. Bowles relinquishes that concept and produces uncertainty, not only in his perception of nature but in the processes of ratiocination itself; the analogical truth of nature is no longer a manifestation of the creator,

but a construct of the perceiver's mind. The foundation of order and stability, the meaning fixed in the text, begins to recede behind the experience of the text itself, a development which Wordsworth exploits.

II

The Prelude is generally read in the context of what is known of Wordsworth's life, which is not surprizing when we consider the prominence of the speaking "I" in the poem and its assertion of subjective experience. Thus, critical readings of the 'Blest Babe' section of Book II tend to see the "trouble" which effects the removal of the "visible world" as the death of Wordsworth's mother or, in some readings, both parents. Geoffrey Hartman, in Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787 - 1814, for instance, prefers this interpretation as it proves valuable to his psychoanalytic approach (220-21). Likewise, for Frances Ferguson, in Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit, the autobiographical interpretation supports her discussion of Wordsworth's concern with language, specifically the relationship of the epitaph to the lost loved one (131-38). I do not dispute the value of either critique, but do suggest that the autobiographical bias tends to distract us from the literary tradition in which Wordsworth was working. Furthermore, it demonstrates a romantic conflation of psychological and linguistic subjects, as well as assumes, naively I think, an unproblematic relationship between lives

and their representation within the conventions of autobiography, let alone lyric. Nevertheless, the autobiographical intent provides, as B. H. Smith would say, The Prelude's "most compelling claim upon our interests and emotions" (Poetic Closure 16). More specifically, it is the conjunction of the autobiographical and the lyrical that makes Wordsworth's long poem most relevant here, as we shall see. It is within that conjunction that the poem and the poet seek to reveal their origin in poetic voice.

In Book I Wordsworth writes, "I yearn towards some philosophic song / Of truth that cherishes our daily life" (230-31). Although he may, as most will argue, be thinking of the planned "Recluse," the sense of "philosophic song" pervades most of his poetry. He opposes it to another kind of writing in which "the whole beautiful fabric seems to lack / Foundation, and withal appears throughout / Shadowy and unsubstantial" (226-28). His concern for what we might call legitimation in the midst of the social and political changes at the end of the eighteenth century is understandable. Nevertheless, in the conclusion to Book II he claims a "Roman confidence":

> I yet
> Despair not of our nature, but retain
> A more than Roman confidence, a faith
> That fails not... (II.457-60)
> A never-failing principle of joy

And purest passion. (II.464-65)

Communion with nature, of course, provides the source of his faith in "our nature," but the argument which leads to this faith is a matter of some trepidation: he begins the conclusion with "If this be error," and it is only because he addresses Coleridge that he is "unapprehensive of contempt."

Reading Book II as a response to the uncertainty he felt in his time proves revealing. Just prior to the "Blessed the infant Babe" passage he declares the inadequacy of ratiocination or any other externally verifiable means as an explanation of how nature "at length was sought for her own sake." He addresses Coleridge directly:

> Thou, my friend, art one
> More deeply read in thy own thoughts; to thee
> Science appears but what in truth she is,
> Not as our glory and our absolute boast,
> But as a succedaneum, and a prop
> To our infirmity. Thou art no slave
> Of that false secondary power by which
> In weakness we create distinctions, then
> Deem that our puny boundaries are things
> Which we perceive, and not which we have made.
> (II.215-24)

"Science" is labelled that "false secondary power" and apparently represents analytical and methodical modes of thought. Wordsworth thereby opens the way to asserting some

other means of explanation, one "unblinded by these outward shows," which ignores "puny boundaries" and reveals the "unity of all."[13]

He begins by conjecturing the first bond in human life. A reciprocal process begins as the child "gathers passion" from the mother, awakening its "torpid life," and in turn projects that feeling back into its conception of the mother and the world: "From nature largely he receives, nor so / Is satisfied, but largely gives again" (268-69). The child establishes through the reciprocal process a "filial bond" with the world. And finally and most importantly the mind "Creates, creator and receiver both" (273). As it receives feeling from the mother it imparts that feeling back in the act of creation, "Working but in alliance with the works / Which it beholds. Such verily, is the first / Poetic spirit of our human life" (274-76).

Significantly, the recognition of a kindred "earthly soul" initiates the process of reciprocal affinity. Through this recognition love awakens in the child and that love is then implicated in its conception of the world. This would suggest that the unifying principle in this conception of the

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[13] A point of significant contrast between Romantic poetics and that of Williams and Webb, for instance, involves this issue of boundaries. Wordsworth would transcend them by asserting their immateriality, while Williams and Webb give them real substance; the former imagines a world of unity, the latter two a world of differences.

boundless self is the "passion" itself. The child recognizes in its own constructs the love which it imparted in the creation of them, the love which is its awakening, and thus feels an affinity with all it perceives. The key is the perception of kindred, the mind projecting its passion into its conceptions and recognizing it there. Wordsworth says, this passion "Hath no beginning," as the mind works "as an agent of the one great mind" in the ongoing process of reciprocation, making the child an "inmate of this active universe"[14] (266).

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[14] Freud's explanation of what he says some people experience as an "oceanic" feeling seems relevant here, specifically as it relates to the next step in Wordsworth's development of the "poetic spirit":

> ... originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive - indeed, an all-embracing - feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. If we may assume that there are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has persisted to a greater or less degree, it would exist in them side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a kind of counterpart to it. In that case, the ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and a bond with the universe - the same ideas with which my friend elucidated the 'oceanic' feeling.
>
> (Civilization and Its Discontents, 15)

To this "purely subjective" feeling Freud attributes the sense

The difficulty arises with what Freud would call the entrance of the "reality principle." Wordsworth says: "For now a trouble came into my mind / From unknown causes: I was left alone / Seeking the visible world, nor knowing why" (291-93). Hartman and Ferguson, as well as many others, read the "trouble" as the death of Wordsworth's mother or, in Hartman's view, both parents. Yet surely that is not consistent with the intent here. The "trouble" is a normal condition, for the infant sensibility is in most people "abated and suppressed." The separation of mind and nature is normal, but Wordsworth's point is that "the infant sensibility, / Great birthright of our being, was in [him] / Augmented and sustained" (285-87), which creates the problem:

> Yet is a path
> More difficult before me, and I fear
> That in its broken windings we shall need
> The chamois' sinews and the eagle's wing. (287-90)

In the expression of how his affinity with nature was sustained, the ratiocinations of "science" will not suffice;

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of the "eternal" that some people experience (11). As Freud's description of the pre-Oedipal state is remarkably similar to Wordsworth's infant sensibility, the presence of the oceanic feeling in adulthood seems to correspond to Wordsworth's claim that the infant sensibility was in him "sustained and augmented."

gaps occur in the linear thought processes, and bridging them requires an imaginative leap unsupported by rationality.

The poet retains the "infant sensibility," the ability to recognize its kindred spirit in the forms which it has made, although those forms are removed from its felt presence. They remain the beloved objects, now in and for themselves, but also as they hearken towards a "sublimer joy" in the soul's sense of boundlessness: "listening to sounds that are / The ghostly language of the ancient earth, / Or make their dim abode in distant winds" (227-29). They evoke intimations of the eternal, something beyond the "puny boundaries . . . we have made," as the soul,

> retains an obscure sense
> Of possible sublimity, to which
> With growing faculties she doth aspire,
> With faculties still growing, feeling still
> That whatsoever point they gain they still
> Have something to pursue. (236-41)

The beloved objects carry something which is beyond what is actually contained or apprehended in their form: "essences of things, by which the mind / Is moved by feelings of delight, to me / came strengthened with a superadded soul..." (345-347). The question must arise: "How shall I trace the history, where seek / The origin of what I then have felt?" (365-66).

We already partially know the answer, the feeling "hath

no beginning." The difficulty, of course, arises from the awareness that that which Wordsworth pursues is formless and boundless. Its presence is felt through the kindred relationship with the beloved objects, through which the individual mind partakes of the "one great mind." The objects carry the passion through which they were created, as they continue to be created, as the passion continues to flow in the reciprocal process that moves the "active universe." The way to "trace" this feeling then is in the creative act. The "elevated mood," the "transport," derives from the pursuit itself, the process of forming, which is precisely what Wordsworth is doing here, attempting to give shape or expression to that which is beyond expression. The feeling is to the forms of poetic expression as the "superadded soul" is to the forms of nature. Just as the recognition of the kindred spirit in nature effects the reciprocal process that creates nature, and creates the sense of the eternal in nature, so the reader recognizes a kindred spirit in the poetry, and effects a reciprocal process in the creation of meaning, which evokes the sense of the eternal. In the Preface to the "Lyrical Ballads" Wordsworth says:

> I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular poetry of the day: it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling.

(Prose Works I.128)

The feeling is the substance and foundation of the poetry, and Wordsworth could go on to say it is also the substance and foundation of the created world; it is the "one great mind" which effects the "unity of all."

Wordsworth thus finds the foundation not only for his "philosophic song" but for his faith in the eternal as well. Poetry and faith flow from the same source, the recognition of the kindred "one great mind" in the forms of conceptualization. The key is participation: as the infant babe participates in the creation of its world, so the reader participates in the creation of meaning in the poem. In the process comes the recognition of kindred which is at once the beginning and the end of that process. Feeling thus binds humanity together in the "active universe," in its active creation.

Wordsworth gets around the oppressive notion of a 'true' perception of reality through evoking in his writing a sense of something beyond words, beyond the boundaries of rationalization, or any single perception. In other words, Cowper's presentation of reality is but the effect of impassioned conceptualization, the means and not the end; its sense of certainty in the external world is an illusion resulting from assuming "that our puny boundaries are things / Which we perceive, and not which we have made." It is the making which counts: the projection of one's spirit into the

world and receiving it back again in an active bond of love.

For Wordsworth, then, faith and poetry are inextricably tied. You cannot have one without the other. He saw in the social upheavals of his time the potential for the loss of both, resulting in the alienation of people from nature and from their fellow beings, and concomitantly from the "one great mind." To write poetry then is to instill faith in the forms of language, so that the reading of that poetry is the experience of faith. If you can produce meaning, you experience faith in the production itself -- and thereby he provides the foundation for his poetry, for communication and for the "unity of all."

While Wordsworth sought to restore a lost presence to poetry, to make the divine move within the poem rather than simply leave its trace, more was at stake than simply the production of poetry. He sought an identification between the presence of the poet in his poem and the presence of the creator in nature. Wordsworth aimed to produce a subject indistinguishable from a divine presence, in effect to transform himself into "the bard," donning the cloak of a perceived universal principle which unites all humanity, and assuming its power. Implicit in this becoming is becoming other, and that is precisely the problem not only Dickinson, Williams and Webb would have with lyric, but a problem for Coleridge as well. Through a lyric revealing of the life of Wordsworth, that life gets transformed into its essence, its

origin in the lyric voice. Wordsworth followed in a tradition of the poet as persona, recognizable through a set of conventional evocations, and attempted to give that persona an historical and natural occurrence in the figure of William Wordsworth. But, of course, it is precisely the historical individual William Wordsworth who is absent.

III

While Wordsworth sought the elevated tone appropriate to the dignified forms of nature, reciprocal and mimetic, Coleridge was not satisfied with that. In fact, as the following letter to Wordsworth suggests, Coleridge sought his own voice, innocent of any mask, design or corrupting influence.

> There is a pretty little ballad song introduced -- and Lewis, I think, has a great and peculiar excellence in these compositions. The simplicity and naturalness is his own, and not imitated; for it is made to subsist in congruity with a language perfectly modern -- the language of his own times, in the same way that the writer of "Sir Cauline" was the language of his times. This, I think, a rare merit: at least, I find, I cannot attain this innocent nakedness, except by assumption. (Letters 1:#225)

Wordsworth's conception of the "bard" implies a persona, a sense of aspiring to take on the features of the

poet/philosopher. For Coleridge the opposite tactic offered the truer course, namely discarding the mask and speaking simply as oneself. As the letter testifies, however, while Coleridge saw this ability in others (i.e. Wordsworth), he sensed his own failure to achieve it; he could only pretend to be himself.[15] This issue gains emphasis throughout his poetic theory as well as his poetry, and raises the problematic or even contradiction implicit in a tradition that assumes naturalness.

Like Wordsworth, Coleridge believed the source of poetry to be in the vitality of life itself, and that that vitality should not only be represented within the poem, but experienced there as well. But Coleridge further believed that not just any language, and certainly not the common speech of ordinary men, as Wordsworth claimed, would accomplish that, but only poetic language. In the famous critical section of the Biographia Literaria,[16] where Coleridge addresses Wordsworth's notion of "the real language

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[15] Coleridge places Wordsworth in the line of the "great bards," Shakespeare and Milton, but does not see the connection as a matter of a common style or an effect of influence, but as a result of three great men speaking as themselves, and so manifesting a similar presence.

[16] Hereafter, individual texts of Coleridge's work will be cited with initials: BL for Biographia Literaria; STC for the Oxford authors edition Samuel Taylor Coleridge; CN for the Collected Notes; CL for the Collected Letters; LS for Lectures on Shakespeare.

of men," he emphatically establishes the point of contention.

> Here let me be permitted to remind the reader, that the positions, which I controvert, are contained in the sentences -- "a selection of the real language of men"; -- "the language of these men (i.e. men in low and rustic life) I propose to myself to imitate, and as far as possible to adopt the very language of men." "Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be any essential difference." It is against these exclusively, that my opposition is, directed. (BL, Vol. 2, 55)

The word "real" receives Coleridge's immediate attention. He decides that Wordsworth must have meant "common language" and goes on to argue that what is best in poetry does not subsist in a language that is common, but rather a distinctive language.

> To me it will always remain a singular and noticeable fact; that a theory which would establish this lingua communis (common tongue), not only as the best, but as the only commendable style, should have proceeded from a poet, whose diction, next to that of Shakespeare and Milton, appears to me of all others the most individualized and characteristic.
>
> (BL 2:99)

The language that distinguishes poetic genius (which Coleridge credits Wordsworth with having) is idiosyncratic and

distinctive to its creator, rather than "common." While Wordsworth claims to "imitate" what he perceives as a purer form of language in his writing, Coleridge argues Wordsworth at his best speaks Wordsworth. "For language is framed to convey not the object alone, but likewise the character, mood and intentions of the person who is representing it" (BL 2:142). It follows that the more distinctive the mind of the poet the more distinctive the language. In the mind of the poet language gets transformed from the dead letter to a "living language."

> But above all do not let me forget, that language is the medium of all Thoughts to ourselves of all Feelings to others, & partly to ourselves -- now a thing cannot be a medium in the living continuity of nature but by essentially partaking of the nature of the two things mediated. Hence our native Language, by the incessant process of unification without the loss of distinction... becomes indeed -- living words. (CN 3:#4237)

The "two things mediated" are of course the perceiving subject and the object of perception. Language produces unification of the two, partaking of both, and in the process itself becomes a new vital entity. The infusion of the dead letter with the mind of the poet, like the infusion of the object with subjectivity, serves to dematerialize the word/world.[17]

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[17] It is, of course, W. C. Williams's aim, in the effort to wrest lyric from Romantic ideology, to give the word and

In a letter to William Godwin, Coleridge again breathes life into mere words.

> I wish you to write a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them -- in short, I wish you to philosophize Horn Tooke's System, and to solve the great Questions -- whether there be reason to hold, that an action bearing all the semblance of Pre-designing Consciousness may yet be simply organic, & whether a series of such actions are possible -- and close on the heels of this question would follow the old 'Is logic the Essence of Thinking?' in other words -- Is thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? & -- how far is the word'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words &c parts & germinations of the Plant? And what is the Law of their growth? -- In something of this order I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of Words & Things, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too. (Letters 1:#352)

Tracking Coleridge through the ecstatic leaps proves no simple matter here. What seems clear is that he is bent on closing the chasm between words and the things which they represent, especially human feelings as they "form affinities with them." He wants to argue that thinking and language are inseparable,

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the world back their material otherness. Where Coleridge would erase the antithesis between words and things, Williams emphasizes that antithesis.

deriving from the same seed, so to speak, and so give words the status of things. The final elevation of words into "living things" is key, because it marks the site, not of the transformation of words into material things, but of the transformation of things into words, that is, "living words." As the following passage reveals, Coleridge conceives of the vitality in "living words" as consisting not so much in individual words or signifiers, precisely, as in their combinations into discursive groups, and in the production of subjectivity in that grouping.

> The words themselves in the foregoing extracts, are, no doubt, sufficiently common for the greater part. (But in what poem are they not so? if we except a few misadventurous attempts to translate the arts and sciences into verse?) In the "Excursion" the number of polysyllabic (or what common people call, dictionary) words is more than usually great. And so must it needs be, in proportion to the number and variety of an author's conceptions, and solicitude to express them with precision. But are those words in those places commonly employed in real life to express the same thought or outward thing? Are they the style used in the ordinary intercourse of spoken words? No! nor are the modes of connections: and still less the breaks and transitions. Would any but a poet -- at least could anyone without being conscious that he had expressed himself with

> noticeable vivacity -- have described a bird singing loud by, "The thrush is busy in the wood?" (BL 2:105)

So, for Coleridge, it is not actually the words used at all, nor the syntax or transitions, that distinguish poetic language, but the subject of discourse. This subject gets construed as a kind of energy, or vitality, infusing the material signifier with spirit.

Whatever aspect of language, philosophy or literature Coleridge discusses he characteristically asserts the same principle: namely the pre-eminence of the subject in the forming of the material. For instance he discusses character, action and imagery in Shakespeare in the same terms.

> It was not the nurse in Romeo and Juliet, not the Dogberry in another of his productions we admired, but it was the poet himself, assuming these shapes, and exhibiting under such forms all the force and magnitude of his own powers.
>
> (LS 1:231)

Coleridge fuses the subject of the discourse with the mind of the poet, and perceives this entity as the force behind/origin of the discourse's peculiar felicities. He argues the significance of metre in the same way: "Physicians have asserted that each passion has its proper pulse -- so it was with metre when rightly used" (LS 1:222).

The principle operative here is of course Coleridge's organic theory, where the inner form manifests itself

externally, where essence becomes entity. Although ubiquitous in Coleridge's thought, the concept remains remarkably precise and consistent in his use of it.

> The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material, as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. (LS, I.224)

On the one hand this "innate form" originates in the mind of the poet, but on the other it seems to originate in language, which in itself proceeds organically.

The growth of language proceeds by a process of "desynonymization" wherein seemingly synonymous words come to have meanings similar but different.[18]

> There is a sort of minim immortal among the animalcula infusoria which has not naturally either birth, or death, absolute beginning, or absolute end: for at a certain period a small point appears on its back, which deepens and lengthens till the creature divides into two, and the same process recommences in each of the halves now become

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[18] I am indebted to James C. McKusick and his book Coleridge's Philosophy of Language for much of my understanding of this concept.

> integral. This may be a fanciful, but it is by no means a bad emblem of the formation of words, and may facilitate the conception, how immense a nomenclature may be organized from a few simple sounds by rational beings in a social state. (BL 1:83n)

This splitting characterizes the "innate form" of language coming into being. We should be careful however not to misconstrue the words produced as exemplifying the innate form, but rather the splitting itself, the process or growth, as constituting the form. The words themselves soon take their place in the "lingua communis."

> When this distinction [desynonymization] has been so naturalized and of such general currency, that the language itself does as it were think for us (like the sliding rule which is the mechanic's safe substitute for arithmetical knowledge) we then say, that it is evident to common sense. ... What was born and christened in the schools passes by degrees into the world at large, and becomes the property of the market and°the tea-table. (BL 1:86n)

Maintaining the "passion" or intellect that produces the splitting entails continued desynonymization. Or, to put it otherwise, continued desynonymization sustains the growth of the form -- producing "living words."

Idiosyncratic language, evidenced especially in the process of desynonymization, and most apparent in the works of

Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, is the coming into being of the vitality of life, the appearance of its innate growth. The mind of the poet, it turns out, is indistinguishable from a living god.[19] It is in this link between language and mind and God as the origin of innate form that Coleridge most forcefully distinguishes his poetic from Wordsworth's. Whereas Wordsworth assumes the persona of the poet, a kind of superhuman speaking to men, Coleridge argues that persona will naturally proceed from the man of genius who speaks as himself. The innate form, namely God, manifests itself, in the growth of the individual and language. God, language and the individual mind are all at some level indistinguishable, the same but different. It is in this essentialism that Coleridge's poetic theory finds its greatest coherence.

> ...the composition of a poem is among the imitative arts; and that imitation, as opposed to copying, consists either in the interfusion of the same throughout the radically different, or of the different throughout a base radically the same.[20] (BL 2:72)

Whether a discovery of sameness in difference, or the

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[19] "We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the SELF, in order to lose and find all self in GOD" (BL 1:283).

[20] See my discussion of Phyllis Webb's poem "Passacaglia" in Chapter Six (186-188). Passacaglia is a slow 18th Century musical form with variations on a recurring baseline.

discovery of difference in sameness, the poem asserts an essential unity. As Coleridge says of those two he considers to be the geniuses of the preceding eras.

> All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of Milton; while Shakespeare becomes all things, yet forever remaining himself. (BL 2:28)

So Coleridge transcends the subject/object distinction and at the same time renders two differing poetic strategies the same.

Where Wordsworth donned the cloak of the "bard" and claimed it as his own, Coleridge sought a continuity between self and other. That he could not fully articulate how this unity exists,[21] and generally relegated the problem to eternal mystery, in no way daunted his enthusiasm for the topic or his relentless efforts to prove¶1206Xit.

> Poem or Spirit -- or Spinoza -- I would make a pilgrimage to the Deserts of Arabia to find the man who could make

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[21] It is along these lines that D.F. Rauber in "The Fragment as Romantic Form" and Thomas McFarland in Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin argue that the fragment poem "embodies romantic ideals and aims" (Rauber 212). Both see the fragment as an allusion to a "wholeness, vast beyond our comprehension, which existed if only momentarily, in the imagination of the poet" (221). The unfathomable whole must of course be monologic, continuous (Rauber and McFarland assume this to be one of the form's virtues), and so the fragment offers a means to affirming a monologic vision without actually having to construct one.

> me understand how the one could be many! Eternal universal mystery! It seems as if it were impossible; yet it is -- & it is everywhere! -- It is indeed a contradiction in terms: and only in Terms! -- It is the co presence of Feeling & Life, limitless by their very essences, with form, by its very essence limited -- determinate -- definite --. (CN 1:#1561)

It is the acknowledgement of this contradiction that distinguishes the kind of poetry written by Coleridge, as well as by the others to be discussed in the chapters which follow. I would argue that this characteristic of lyric, when not cloaked in mystery (i.e. The Prelude), and not simply dismissed as irrelevant (i.e. Eliot and the modernists), actually precludes the closure with which lyric is generally associated.

Chapter Two

"Choral Minstrelsy": Coleridge's Conversation Poem

"that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks
shift their wheels and pins into each other
and emerge living, for hours"
(Michael Ondaatje, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid 11)

"The private and the public, the merely personal
and the truly universal, resist one another, yes,
but from that struggle comes lyric poetry,
both monodic and choral, at its best."
(W. R. Johnson, The Idea of Lyric)

The contradiction in terms Coleridge refers to at the end of the previous chapter, parallels the contradiction implicit in the idea of a lyric tradition. That is, how can a genre which claims an origin in the self and in the moment of its

inception be traditional? It is precisely this contradiction that Coleridge seeks to resolve in his "The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem," but with problematic results, as I will show.

A number of the lyric poems Coleridge wrote in the years 1794 to 1802 have been grouped together under the term "conversation poems." Clearly, these lyrics have similarities; they all conform to what M.H. Abrams calls "dramatic lyric", a form in which the speaker addresses a "you" in a particular situation. Abrams goes on to warn us not to confuse the "I" of the dramatic lyric with the author, but to recognize the speaker as "adapted to the particular lyric situation and effect, and [that his] utterance is ordered so as to constitute an artistic whole" (Glossary 98). Even Barbara Herrnstein Smith's distinction between fictional and historical utterance, while offering a considerably more complex and interesting reading of lyric than the New Critics, nevertheless asserts that same difference between lyric speakers and real speakers, wherein the poem is "what one might say" in a particular situation, and not actually what one is saying (Margins 28). These approaches too quickly overlook the earnest attempts to elide any such distinctions between author and persona, historical and fictional occasions in the Conversation Poems. In so doing those approaches place at a comfortable distance the implications of such attempts, ascribe them to aesthetic convention, safely out of this

world. In that rarefied atmosphere speakers are complete unto themselves, whole, internally coherent and unsullied by the mundane. The desirability of such speakers is implicit in the approach; the longing for escape from this mortal coil is built in.

In contrast, the Romantics themselves were less trepid when negotiating the boundary between art and reality. While to the New Critics a closed lyric form was a natural expression of a universal human desire for release from the world, Coleridge, particularly, sought not escape from, but entry into the world. Quoting poetry in the midst of a philosophical, political or social treatise was not an anomaly in his mind because they were not, or should not be, distinct genres. He did not seek out the hearth and heath in order to escape the world, but to find it again. However, through strategies designed to naturalize lyric conventions, to ground them in reality, he actually accomplished the reverse. Instead of the lyric subject's gaining the substantiality of nature, nature acquired the ephemerality of lyric subjectivity in his poetry.

Romantic attempts to root the poem in nature and reality range from the subtle to the obvious, such as the commonplace of dating and locating the poem's occasion of utterance as specifically as possible. In this strategy, as in others, the lyric convention of asserting a source in reality is invoked. Coleridge's dating of "The Nightingale, April 1798," for

instance, while not as specific as Wordsworth's preamble to "Tintern Abbey," nevertheless attempts to give the poem an historical basis, rather than a fictional one, and this occasion becomes implicated in the poem's legitimation. The success of such strategies can be seen in the response of critics such as George McLean Harper.

> It is unfair to ourselves that we should refuse the companionship of the most open-hearted of men, a generous spirit, willing to reveal to us the riches of his mind, a man whom all can understand and no one can help loving. There is not so much kindness, humor, wisdom, and frankness offered to most of us in the ordinary intercourse of life that we can afford to decline the outstretched hand of Coleridge. ("Coleridge's Conversation Poems" 190)

Although Harper, I'm sure, does not believe Coleridge is actually present in the poem, it seems everything of the man that matters is. His willingness to accept this speaker as Coleridge the man (albeit metaphorically, i.e. "outstretched hand") reveals his own Romantic sympathies, that "willing suspension of disbelief" that he proceeds to argue on moral grounds. It is a curious inconsistency in New Critical and Modernist thought generally, which permits on the one hand the recognition that the speaker is an aesthetic construct, out of this world, and on the other hand identifies the poet with that speaker, thereby elevating (or reducing, depending on

your point of view) the poet to a transcendental plane.[22] This nostalgia for transcendence and escape from the meanness of everyday life can be seen as a consequence of the poems' strategies for naturalizing lyric conventions, which have the peculiar result of making the man Coleridge a ghostly paradigm.

Benveniste describes this ghostly paradigm as "the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness" (Problems in General Linguistics 224). In Romantic aesthetics this consciousness becomes elevated to a position above the absent material world, in which that

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[22] The critical task of getting to know the man behind the poem has, not surprisingly, been the dominant trend in the critical work done on the Romantics. Even the more sophisticated philosophical and psychoanalytical readings of Coleridge assume a consciousness that it is the end of criticism to reveal. See Edwin Webb's "'Reality's Dark Dream': Coleridge's language of consciousness," or Charles Rzepka's The Self as Mind, or Frederick Kirchoff's "Constructing a Self: Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight'" which concludes: "To read 'Frost at Midnight' is to read, as much as it is possible to read, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It follows that what we cannot, ultimately, understand about the poem is not other than what we cannot, ultimately, understand about the poet" (375). Even Frederick Garber's extensive and important studies of Romantic constructions of subjectivity (Self, Text and Romantic Irony and The Autonomy of the Self from Richardson to Huysmans) make similar kinds of assumptions.

material world is but a figure of consciousness, as the earlier discussion of Wordsworth shows. Presumably it is the act of figuring that is important, not the figure itself. It is the consciousness figuring forth itself in nature, the person and the poem that gains the center of attention, and centers the world, the person and the poem.

The attempts to stabilize and isolate this act of figuring presented problems for the Romantics and their critics. In a review of David Simpson's book, Wordsworth and the Figuring of the Real, Tillottama Rajan takes issue with the claim that Wordsworth, and the Romantics generally, embraced "an ethic of the polymorphous" so that "to the conventional view of the Romantic imagination as mythopoeic we must add a new understanding of it as semioclastic (to use Barthes' word): aware that its mythologies are not archetypal but culturally conditioned, and therefore fit objects for ideological criticism and semiological dismantling" (123). The issue of contention seems to revolve around the question of whether the Romantics were more devoted to process or product, to the process of figuring the real or to the figures produced. Simpson argues that Wordsworth's epistemology gains a generally unrecognized coherence when we acknowledge its commitment to process. Rajan suggests Wordsworth's commitment to process disguises an essentialism that privileges certain figurations over others. While I think Rajan is right, I think Simpson is correct as well in his emphasis on the

process of figuring. The difficulty arises when the process gets figured, when process becomes product, you might say, for in Romantic poetics the nightingale must always inevitably sing the same song.

The dispute reveals a problem the Romantics themselves sought to resolve, and an important issue in the discussion of lyric and the function of the subject within Romantic lyric. It informs Antony Easthope's argument that the Romantics emphasized the sense of someone really speaking, a quality inherent in blank verse, in order to subjugate "enunciation" to the "enunciated," thereby positing a particular spoken subject as the inevitable growth of natural speech (Poetry as Discourse 131). As the term "natural" implies, the consciousness figured forth will always be the same, regardless of its content, as can be seen in those favorite Romantic images having to do with streams, rivers and waterfalls.

> I had considered it as a defect in the admirable poem of the Task, that the subject, which gives the title to the work, was not, and indeed could not be, carried on beyond the three or four first pages, and that throughout the poem the connections are frequently awkward, and the transitions abrupt and arbitrary. I sought for a subject, that should give equal room and freedom for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural

> connection to the parts, and unity to the whole. Such a subject I conceived myself to have found in a stream, traced from its source in the hills among the yellow-red moss and conical glass-shaped tufts of bent, to the first break or fall, where its drops became audible, and it begins to form a channel; thence to the peat and turf barn, itself built of the same dark squares as it sheltered; to the sheep-fold; to the first cultivated plot of ground; to the lonely cottage and its bleak garden won from heath; to the hamlet, the villages, the market town, the manufactories, and the seaport. (BL 255)

In this, Coleridge's proposed poem "The Brook," everything changes yet somehow remains the same. The figurings display a continuity developed through process. Likewise Wordsworth in the Mt. Snowden episode has much to say about such motion. It can be found in that "blue chasm" where there are "streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice" and, as well, in a longer meditation on the same scene.

> This faculty hath been the moving soul
> Of our long labour: we have traced the stream
> From darkness, and the very place of birth
> In its dark cavern, whence is faintly heard
> The sound of waters; followed it to light
> And open day, accompanied its course
> Among the ways of Nature, afterwards

> Lost sight of it bewildered and engulphed,
> Then given it greeting as it rose once more
> With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast
> The works of man, and face of human life;
> And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
> The feeling of life endless, the one thought
> By which we live, infinity and God.
>
> (Prelude 1805 13.166-184)

The image accurately represents the transformation of enunciation to enunciated in the greater Romantic odes, in which as Jonathan Culler says "nothing need happen because the poem itself is to be the happening" (Pursuit 149). The voice forever speaking and still forever remaining the same constitutes the dialectic and problematic informing Coleridge's Conversation Poems. As in the reverse effect I have just noted (in which the attempt to ground the lyric world in reality actually produces the opposite effect), here Coleridge and Wordsworth propose that their images have the foundation of a stable origin (i.e. the creating consciousness figuring forth itself) when in fact that origin's stability derives from its figured form.

It is significant that Coleridge subtitled only one poem "A Conversation Poem," namely "The Nightingale." The form of the address is distinctly different in each of the lyric poems that usually get grouped together. In "The Eolian Harp," for instance, Coleridge addresses Sara, who disapproves of his

abstruse speculations. In "This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison" he addresses Charles Lamb, who is absent; in "Frost at Midnight" he addresses his infant who sleeps, and wouldn't understand him anyway; and in "Dejection: An Ode" he intersperses his address to the absent Sara Hutchinson with a number of apostrophic addresses to himself, vipers or the storm. Only in "The Nightingale" does he address someone present and of like mind. In the latter, the address is not so much an "I" speaking to a "you" as it is a "we" speaking to ourselves. Rajan has noted this as the monologic desire of the poem to exclude difference (Dark Interpreter 214-215). This certainly seems to be the case, and it also implies the rationale behind that monologic order. Meaning is dependent upon it, or at least a meaning that is stable. Such meaning assumes and confirms the similarity between subjects rather than acknowledging the differences. The use of "we" in the address negates the distinction between "I" and "you," and focusses the attention on the common denominator, namely an assumed and universal originating consciousness that centers the poem.

So the poem represents itself and nature as a series of echoes moved by "one sensation." Or rather, the poem asserts that it is not a representation at all, but an echo of the nightingale, which the nightingale in turn echoes, forming the "choral minstrelsy." As in a dialogue between like minds, all parts of this orchestration are tuned to the same key (i.e.

Benveniste's "psychic unity"), out of which the music arises. That is, the poem seeks to reveal that key (to continue the metaphor) as the origin of its natural harmony. However, the revelation discloses the key to be a figural representation of the origin, an image of sound like those favorite Romantic images I have already cited.

The anchoring of that "psychic unity" in nature occurs in the opening deictics of the poem, in the assertion of a material time and place. Coleridge begins by negating the stock and trade of nature poetry, or in other words intertextuality, to assert his situation in reality.

> No cloud, no relique of the sunken day
> Distinguishes the West, no long thin slip
> Of sullen light, no obscure trembling hues.
> Come, we will rest on this old mossy bridge!
> You see the glimmer of the stream beneath,
> But hear no murmuring: it flows silently,
> O'er its soft bed of verdure. (1-7)

The absence of light and sound reflects an absence of the conventions of descriptive nature poetry, and a clearing away of artifice in order to reveal a specific occasion. Coleridge and his friends center themselves in the dark silence and begin the elaboration of a "real" context in the absence of a traditional one. The speaking originates in the absence, producing this "reality" and a regeneneration.

> All is still,

A balmy night! and though the stars be dim,
Yet let us think upon the vernal showers
That gladden the green earth, and we shall find
A pleasure in the dimness of the stars. (7-11)

Coleridge begins by denial rather than affirmation, as he rejects traditional descriptive imagery like so much noise. He clears away tradition in order to reveal the real but, curiously, as the light of consciousness grows, the world recedes into darkness.

Thinking about the regenerative spring showers in this absence of both light and sound, "the Nightingale begins its song." The poem asks us to respond to the song of the nightingale as it is, not as it has been represented to us.

And hark! the Nightingale begins its song,
'Most musical, most melancholy' bird!
A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought!
In nature there is nothing melancholy.
But some night-wandering man, whose heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he and such as he,
First named these notes a melancholy strain. (12-22)

The poet should respond to all nature through direct experience of it, "surrendering his whole spirit, of his song/

and of his fame forgetful." He should, in other words, escape self-conscious awareness of the experience and achieve an "imaginary"[23] pre-Oedipal union with "the influxes/ Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements." This absolute identification with the other, in which consciousness gets fully absorbed in its content, in which there is no excess of consciousness, represents for Coleridge the impulse towards externalization of inward form. The poem should be this impulse realizing itself naturally, as nature, or as a nightingale's song. While the nightingale is a metaphor for the poem itself, the poem would deny its metaphoricity, and assert not a comparison but an identification.

.... 'Tis the merry Nightingale
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates
With fast thick warble his delicious notes,
As he were fearful that an April night

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[23] The concept of course comes from Lacan. His parable of the "mirror stage" designates subjectivity as a process of continual misrecognition. The infant perceives its reflection in a mirror and misconstrues that reflection as identical with itself. In this state, the "Imaginary," the ego takes up a fixed position in the field of the other, a point of identification through which to know itself. But, of course, this position is only a reflection and not itself, which produces the sense of alienation and lack. This lack initiates a dialectic in which, as Easthope says, "I am neither the eye which sees, nor the reflection seen, rather I am the very process or movement between the two" (Easthope, 39-40).

> Would be too short for him to utter forth
> His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul
> Of all its music. (43-49)

In other words the nightingale is a figure for lyric as the Romantics have taught us to understand the term. The poem aspires to share the qualities it attributes to the nightingale, and so to "share in Nature's immortality." We are asked to accept the poem as an actual experience, rather than as a representation, an actual experience that reveals its inner form, a figure of itself. The poem argues that, like nature, it is itself a figure of its own figuring. The difficulty with this reasoning has been noted by even the most sympathetic of critics, as Jonathan Culler has pointed out. He quotes M.H. Abrams.

> "...to substitute the concept of growth for the operation of a mechanism in the psychology of invention seems merely to exchange one kind of determinism for another, while to replace the mental artisan-planner by the concept of organic self-generation makes it difficult, analogically, to justify the participation of consciousness in the creative process." (Pursuit 173)

This determinism negates the freedom of the poet and insures what kind of growth will result. In other words, the poet is free to produce only one kind of growth, a particular form of discourse at the expense of any others. The nightingale will always sing the same song because the nightingale has already

been defined by that song. Within this privileged discourse only those figures which offer absolute identification will be deemed "natural," and any excess or dissonance must be excluded. The problematic becomes more specific with the recognition that an identification between the figure and act of figuring actually necessitates exclusion of the act of figuring. That is, the growth must cut itself off from its source in order to figure it. This discontinuity between figuring and the figured parallels that between enunciation and the enounced, a discontinuity that informs those "flowing" Romantic images I have just cited. The desire to stabilize the discontinuity, through the production of figures of figuring, overdetermines the indeterminate, and finally conceals what it seeks to reveal.

In Romantic poetics the "specular image" (to borrow Lacan's term) contains the figuring, the process of its production. But, if this is the case, then the process of production occurs linguistically and not phenomenologically, which is precisely what the poem seeks to deny in its assertion of the source of language as being in the self. The refusal of that linguistic process splits the subject off from its materiality in signification, in the world. Being in the dark night turns out to be not being at all but a representation of being, the "imago" of being. Even the transformation of the speaking into the spoken gets repeatedly represented in the poem as a transformation of hearing into

seeing.

> But never elsewhere in one place I knew
> So many nightingales; and far and near,
> In wood and thicket, over the wide grove,
> They answer and provoke each other's song,
> With skirmish and capricious passagings,
> And murmurs musical and swift jug jug,
> And one low piping sound more sweet than all --
> Stirring the air with such a harmony,
> That should you close your eyes, you might almost
> Forget it was not day! On moonlight bushes,
> Whose dewy leaflets are but half-disclosed,
> You may perchance behold them on the twigs,
> Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full
> Glistening, while many a glow-worm in the shade
> Lights up her love-torch. (55-68)

As the sound of nightingales gains the substance and coherence of the image of "bright eyes," motion becomes stasis and voice becomes vision.

Integral to this transformation is the sense of an actual voice speaking. Coleridge accomplishes this through a pair of strategies, the first of which can be identified with the help of Culler. He explores the curious condition of a process in which nothing happens.

This puts the case for apostrophic poetry against

> narrative. If one brings together in a poem a boy, some birds, a few blessed creatures, and some mountains, meadows, hills and groves, one tends to place them in narrative where one thing leads to another; the events which form ask to be temporally located... But if one puts into a poem thou shepherd boy, ye blessed creatures, ye birds, they are immediately associated with what might be called a timeless present but is better seen as a temporality of writing. Even if the birds were only glimpsed once in the past, to apostrophize them as 'ye birds' is to locate them in the time of the apostrophe -- a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say 'now.' This is a time of discourse rather than story. So located by apostrophes, birds, creatures, boys, etc., resist being organized into events that can be narrated, for they are inserted in the poem as elements of the event which the poem is attempting to be. (Pursuit 149)

The shift from story time to discourse time neatly describes the movement of "the Nightingale." One of the most interesting things Coleridge does in this poem is to elide the differences between the two. The poem begins in the narrative moment upon the bridge, and then leaves that narrative location to ramble discursively through a series of musings and anecdotes without narrative connection to that originating moment. The connection occurs at the level of discourse time.

What happens in the poem is that a discursive event gets situated narratively, which tends to give the narrative moment the authenticity of the now of discourse, while at the same time giving the now of discourse stability through its link to a specific historical occasion. This elision makes the voice all the more immediate and seemingly phenomenal. If, as de Man says, the lyric enterprize is the phenomenalization of voice ("Lyrical Voice" 55), then "The Nightingale" seems quintessentially lyric.

Just as the historical occasion of utterance in the poem gets implicated into its legitimation through an identification, in Herrnstein Smith's terms, between fictional and historical utterance, so there is the added identification between poetic utterance and actual speaking. Antony Easthope offers useful direction on this point.

> In accentual metre the stress of the intonation and the abstract pattern coincide and reinforce each other; in pentameter they are counterpointed.... . [In accentual there is only one way to speak the line and the meter denies space to the individual voice except to join a pre-given order it cannot modify. In significant contrast, the counterpoint of pentameter is a function of two opposed requirements, those of the abstract pattern and the non-metric intonation, between which any performance is free to find its own inflection. Instead of the collective voice of accentual metre pentameter ‖ Xmeter]

> gives space to the 'natural' intonation and so to a single voice in the closure of its own coherence. (73-4)

Resurrecting the concept of counterpoint as fundamental to iambic pentameter, Easthope demonstrates how the sense of an actual voice speaking derives from an opposition between the ideal and the actual that, in fact, rather than producing an actual voice, reduces the speaking to the spoken, to logocentricity, lending greater emphasis to syntax and linear coherence along the syntagmatic chain. "By eliding metricality in favour of 'the prosody of natural speech' the pentameter would render poetic discourse transparent, aiming to identify the speaking of a poem with the speaking of a represented speaker or a narrator..." (75).

We see in "The Nightingale" how counterpointing an ideal meter against the actual stress of individual words serves to foreground irregular speech patterns, providing a sense of the determination of word combinations deriving from an internal source rather than an outward imposition of form. Likewise, the frequent use of enjambment and caesura further obscures the physical limits of line length in favour of the meaning produced along the syntagmatic chain, as in the following lines from "The Nightingale."

> All is still,
> A balmy night! and though the stars be dim,
> Yet let us think upon the vernal showers
> That gladden the green earth, and we shall find

A pleasure in the dimness of the stars. (7-11)

The passage begins with short syntactical units that create pauses breaking up the longer pentameter lines, followed by larger units (seven or eight beats) that exceed the lines, and concluding with a strong emphasis on "stars" deriving from the coincidence of the conclusion of both the line and the syntactical unit. We gain a sense of a stuttering attempt to describe that finds itself and begins to flow from a source within itself, free of any imposition of mechanical form. Not ideal form but the discovery of meaning constitutes the shape of the versification. Similarly the movement follows a course from external nature ("A balmy night") to an internal state ("Let us think"), as well as from stasis ("All is still") to process ("vernal showers/ That gladden the green earth"). The "process" transforms nature: the "dim Stars" first described negatively, turn into a positive just at the moment that the real conforms to the ideal of the pentameter line break. In other words, the outward form of the blank verse appears to be the expression of its inner meaning. The outward form seems to flow from a inner process of forming, and so iambic pentameter appears to be the inevitable shape of the "natural" speaking voice.

The identification between the speaking subject and the subject of enunciation lacks inevitability. The assumption of such identification, however, determines (or perhaps overdetermines) how we read the poem; an assumption that

declaring a specific historical occasion, as well as the argument of the poem, reinforces. Coleridge would have us believe that what determines the shape of the poem is the revelation of its originating source within it. But what actually gets revealed? It seems the subject of enunciation is revealed, which in turn determines the enunciation.

> Meaning 'insists' along the syntagmatic axis, and so the attempt to close meaning along the axis offers a coherent position to the subject as 'a single voice' sustaining meaning and itself sustained in 'this linearity.' (Easthope 69)

A closed circle reveals itself and necessarily separates itself from any origin beyond itself, such as the self or nature. The poem becomes an autonomous verbal construct that may stand in for self or nature but is not either, which is of course contrary to what Coleridge would have us believe. Benveniste tells us the "I" has no referent except in the instant of utterance, and what it refers to in that instant is not the individual who speaks but the linguistic representation of that individual within the utterance (218). What is inevitable then is a discontinuity, not a continuity, between the speaking and the spoken. The stable "I" that Coleridge posits as an originary consciousness reveals itself to be a function of the discourse on which its coherence depends. Coherence and unity depend upon the assumption of a stable "I," a centering function, while at the same time the

perception of coherence and unity appears to validate that assumption.

Coleridge conflates the experience of the poem with the poem as representation, the being of the speaker with the meaning, the empirical occasion of utterance with voice, and finds in lyrical convention a natural origin. This is, of course, what the poem is about, namely finding spectral analogues for its speaking.

> and oft a moment's space,
> What time the moon was lost behind a cloud,
> Hath heard a pause of silence; till the moon
> Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky
> With one sensation, and those wakeful birds
> Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,
> As if some sudden gale had swept at once
> A hundred airy harps! And she hath watched
> Many a nightingale perch giddily
> On blossomy twig swinging from the breeze,
> And to that motion tune his wanton song
> Like tipsy Joy that reels with tossing head. (75-86)

As listening transforms into watching, the "one sensation" finds its figural representation in visible nature. But what is clear is that visible nature gets figured as an expression not of self or consciousoess, but of a linguistically constructed subjectivity.

We are now in a position to see the predominant impetus

within the poem. As the opening lines attempt to isolate the originating consciousness through a series of negations of traditional descriptive poetry, they attribute to the speaking voice the authenticity of a real man speaking in a real time and place. In turn poetic convention and the subject produced in it gain the benefit of that authenticity. In this way the poem asserts that the images which follow are authentic because they accurately figure the speaking voice, which of course they do, because that voice actually originates in their depiction. In the refusal to acknowledge the latter fact, which is consistent with the refusal to acknowledge Milton's voice in the nightingale,[24] and beyond him the whole history of lyric convention, Coleridge closes his poem off from its origin.

As the poem strives to stabilize meaning and subjectivity in a common origin in self and nature, it reveals that source

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[24] Coleridge's quotation, "'Most musical, most melancholy' bird," comes of course from Milton's "Il Penseroso."

> 'Less Philomel will deign a Song,
> In her sweetest, saddest plight,
> Smoothing the rugged brow of night,
> While Cynthia checks her Dragon yoke,
> Gently o'er the accustom'd Oak;
> Sweet Bird that shunn'st the noise of folly,
> Most musical, most melancholy! (59-62)

Coleridge's claim to be imitating not Milton, but nature itself, overdetermines nature, and actually accomplishes the reverse of what he intends.

to be not in nature or self at all, but in a discourse that precludes self or nature. In other words it closes itself off from its origins, its own production, through the attempt to figure that production phenomenologically and not linguistically. Actually, it shuts down that creative source by enclosing it within the limits of a kind of sealed echo chamber, where the speaker misperceives the echo as a response rather than simply an echo of his "always/already" linguistically constructed subjectivity. Maintaining the illusion means keeping the chamber sealed.

Coleridge does not maintain the illusion, but exits the chamber in the last stanza: "Farewell, O Warbler! till to-morrow eve, / And you, my friends! farewell, a short farewell! / We have been loitering long and pleasantly, / And now for our dear homes." The return of story time interrupts the imaginative flight and strains our "willing suspension of disbelief" too far. The return to storyline, to the place of the poem's beginning in a specific location and time, constitutes a return to a reality discontinuous with the world of the poet's imagination. That continuity between an occasion of utterance and the utterance itself breaks off as a gap appears between them, bringing into question the foundation and legitimacy of the speaker and its configurations.

This essentially marks that subtle but important difference between Wordsworth and Coleridge that I alluded to

in the previous chapter. Wordsworth wholeheartedly adopts the persona of the bard, unquestioningly assumes the mouth of the enunciated subject, channels the enunciative act into the enunciated, producing a closed echo chamber from which Wordsworth the man is already excluded. Who speaks here? Clearly, the answer must be the discourse of the bard, and not Wordsworth. Coleridge, on the other hand, as one might expect, pursues the idea further, seeking the explicit connection between enunciated and enunciating subjects, thereby revealing a discontinuity. Where Wordsworth makes the leap of faith across the discontinuity in Romantic lyric, Coleridge attempts to build a bridge. In the whole of his work one can find the attempt to overcome that discontinuity, whether he be delving into philosophy, sociology, politics, psychology or poetics. Indeed, the impossibility of the pursuit may add significantly to the fragmentation and difficulty in much of Coleridge's thought.

Much of the Modernist and New Critical response to the Romantics, both positive and negative, assumes the irrelevance of the discontinuity. The exclusion of the real is taken for granted, for the Modernists will have no truck with that. "All that is personal soon rots," Yeats declares, "it must be packed in ice or salt" (Selected Criticism 266). "Art is in no way an expression of personality" Eliot writes, "but an escape from it" (Selected Prose 30). Lyric works toward the formation of an artistic whole, according to Abrams. The

privileging of the Romantic ideal of motion without change privileges a particular form of discourse, of lyric, and elevates that ideal to the rank of, as Northrop Frye might call it, the "total dream of man" (Anatomy 119), a condition from which we have fallen. The Romantics themselves shared the lament for the fall; however, Coleridge in particular sought not escape but reconciliation. While his nostalgia for a lost monologic order seems his major bequest to the Modernists, we should not overlook his attempted engagement with the world.[25] That attempt to enclose enunciation in the

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[25] See David Miall's "Coleridge on Emotion: Experience into Theory." Miall notes that since "the decline of the New Critics, Coleridge's influence in setting the terms within which literary studies are conducted has diminished, but goes on to suggest that "if one Coleridge is disappearing, another one may be on the horizon" (39). He bases this idea on the importance he believes Coleridge places on "feeling" in his theories. He quotes from the Notebooks: "By deep feeling we make our ideas dim -- & this is what we mean by our Life -- ourselves... the Feeling is deep & steady -- and this I call I" (CN I:921). Noting that Coleridge's thinking relies on an inordinate amount of introspection and analysis of personal experience for its basis, Miall sees Coleridge as attempting to overcome the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. Or, in the terms I have been using, he attempts to discover a continuity between the self and its representation. But Miall goes on to suggest, very interestingly, that perhaps " the major insight that Coleridge made ... was to redefine the self as a process of which we have some awareness, but which exists primarily beyond consciousness" (38).

form of the enunciated makes us aware of the incongruity inherent in the process.

Lacan tells us that the "unconscious of the subject is the discourse of the other" (Ecrits 55). It is precisely this unconscious that Coleridge feels compelled to keep out of his lyric, by negating the other, in order to achieve the kind of coherence he desires. The refusal to acknowledge the role of Milton's nightingale in the tune of his own closes the speaker off from history, and collapses story time into discourse time, where there can be motion but nothing changes. This drive to make known or, more precisely, to see what is hidden in the speaking seems to draw on a powerful lyric convention. For Romantics such as Wordsworth and, to a lesser extent, Coleridge, seeing seems to have become more important than seeing well and truly, for, as I have argued, they actually concealed what they sought to reveal. In fact, in order to achieve the stability they longed for, they imagined the end of desiring.[26] The lyric genre offered the Romantics a configuration of knowing, but in order for them to know, lyric would have to be closed; hence, lyric closure. And closed genres, as Bakhtin tells us, reveal themselves, and nothing beyond themselves. I would argue, then, that the closure is

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[26] The reasons why they would have felt such pressure to know, I have suggested in the first section of Chapter Two. In brief, reaction against the mechanisms of Enlightenment thought threatened social stability and community.

the property of Romantic ideology and not necessarily of the lyric genre.

One more point needs to be considered. It seems ironic that lyric, with all its historical as well as mythic associations with music,[27] would have come to be so closely allied with the image. Clearly, Coleridge's transformations of sound into image offered him a means of stabilizing and purifying sound, silencing unwanted static. It seems reasonable, then, that lyric's close association with the image might also be an effect of Romantic ideology.[28]

Sharon Cameron argues that Emily Dickinson's poetry reveals the inherent contradictions in the lyric genre and the impossibility of their resolution. But rather than seeing this as a failure of lyric, we might read it as lyric's revelation of the contradictions in Romantic ideology. This is a process Coleridge engaged in, somewhat inadvertently. Dickinson, as the next chapter will argue, felt the contradictions with much greater immediacy, as well as feeling with greater insistence the pressure and difficulty of

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[27] See A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms edited by Roger Fowler, or David Lindley's Lyric, which devotes a chapter to music and the lyric.

[28] I do not mean to suggest that lyric's association with the image, or with closure for that matter, began with the Romantic period, for of course Romanticism did not begin there either, but rather its roots go back at least into the Renaissance.

resolving them. Rupturing form, closure and syntax in her attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, she exposes not the failure of lyric but its potential adaptability to changing ideologies, perhaps even its role in changing those ideologies.

Chapter Three

Dickinson's Broken Lyric

"It is probably necessary to be a woman (ultimate guarantee of sociality beyond the wreckage of the paternal symbolic function, as well as the inexhaustible generator of its renewal, of its expansion) not to renounce theoretical reason but to compel it to increase its power by giving it an object beyond its limits."
(Kristeva, Desire in Language, 146)

"Anonymous dramatic monologue, figment revealing only its own disguising, we will never capture Dickinson in one interpretation. Her soul's deepest necessity was to flee such forced sterility."
(Susan Howe, My Emily Dickinson, 106)

"Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can't stop for that! My business is to love. I found a bird,

this morning, down -- down -- on a little bust
at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing,
I said, since nobody hears?"
(Dickinson's Letters 177, summer 1862)

That enigmatic figure, Emily Dickinson, has herself elicited almost as much interest as her poetry. The woman who retreated further and further into her father's house yet bundled some 1700 poems into neat packets and left them for posterity. These poems themselves appear to mirror her reclusive life, as the speaker in the poems seems equally enigmatic and reticent, as well as singularly unconcerned with the events of her time. This reticence in her poetry has been variously interpreted. It is at times considered to be an effect of her shy nature, provoking a withdrawal from the world, a hiding. At other times it is understood as her radical skepticism, an assumption that the world is unknowable, which precluded any interest in her temporal context. Clearly, the kind of attachment to specific historical occasions that Coleridge strives for has no place in Dickinson's poetics, but one need not conclude from this that she was detached from her social and historical context, removed from the reality of nineteenth-century Amherst -- in other words seek biographical explanations -- but rather might conclude that the reticence in her poetry evolves from

intellectual and aesthetic concerns.[29] In other words, one might conclude that Dickinson's connections with the world subsist on a different level. Attempts to ground her ambiguous or vague deictics in a referential world, undertaken by critics such as Judy Jo Small in her book Positive as Sound: Emily Dickinson's Rhyme, seem to me to shift the emphasis of the poems away from an ineffable core, the unnameable, to a verifiable reality. They thus seek to explain away or ignore the discontinuity between the speaker in the poems and the referential world, and form a seamless congruity flowing from the poet's life to its representation that denies the poems much of their power.

Joanne Dobson, in her Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in 19th Century America, offers us a surer path to showing Dickinson's engagement with her time. She explores the means available for a woman writer to express a woman's life in nineteenth century America, and argues that the means were few and problematic within the

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[29] In fact, Richard B. Sewall suggests we read even Dickinson's reticence in real life as an effect of aesthetic concerns. "At the outset, and knowing well how qualified it will have to be, I should like to emphasize the degree to which her way of life represented a conscious choice. I think we should at least walk into the mystery standing up. More than is true of almost any other poet in the tradition, her life, like the major vehicle of her poetry, was metaphoric; and as she grew older, it became more and more deliberately so" (The Life of Emily Dickinson 4).

dominant conservative ideology which defined "feminine morality in large part as altruism, selflessness and reticence" (xi). Women won approbation for conformity to this ideal, and in so far as they accepted this role were credited with providing the moral backbone of American culture. Recognition, it seems, came only through conformity, which ironically, of course, turns out to be invisibility. Through a survey of the popular and flourishing women's writing of the time, Dobson concludes that the height of recognition for a woman was marriage, which almost invariably meant the end of the story. Identity was offered solely as disappearance into the well-established stereotype.

However, this is not to say the stereotype went unchallenged. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson's editor friend, observed that according to popular ideology a woman consisted solely of a dismembered brain and tongue, like a Carnival side show attraction he recalled.

> The Invisible Lady, as advertised in all our cities a good many years ago, was a mysterious individual who remained unseen, and had apparently no human organs except a brain and tongue... To many men, doubtless, she would have seemed the ideal of her sex, could only her brain and tongue have disappeared like the rest of her faculties. ("Temperament" quoted by Joanne Dobson, Strategies of Reticence 56)

Furthermore, within a disreputable and sensationalist sub-

literature readily available to readers of the period, "aspects of women's life eradicated from the mainstream literature -- sexuality, ambition, anger -- were fulsomely represented, in a manner that objectified, distorted, and perverted them" (58).[30] So, while a highly proscriptive mentality dominated women's writing, and women generally, an awareness of its oppression was also present.

Dobson attributes Dickinson's reticence to the pressures of social conformity. This accounts for her decision not to publish, as well as, through internalization of that pressure, her resistance to disclosure in the poetry itself. The trick for a woman was to appear to speak while at the same time, through an "expressive sleight of hand," remain silent as an individual. Dobson argues that, short of resorting to the scandalous, two personas were available to a woman writer: the "little girl" or the "invisible wife." In support of this conclusion, she analyzes one poem Dickinson wrote which confronts the narrowness of these options.

I'm "wife" -- I've finished that --
That other state --
I'm Czar -- I'm "Woman" now --

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[30] Dobson observes that this was the sort of literature that few would admit to reading, but most read in private. She goes on to say that such writing actually served to reinforce the fear of "an unmonitored female discourse." Nevertheless, the existence of such a widely received literature suggests it served a need.

It's safer so --

How odd the Girl's life looks
Behind this soft Eclipse --
I think that Earth feels so
To folks in Heaven -- now --

This being comfort -- then
That other kind -- was pain --
But why compare?
I'm "Wife"! Stop there! (P199)

The poem conjures up the conventional notion of marriage as transformational, the crown of womanhood, but one that also renders the woman invisible and insubstantial. The end of the story, the end of thought apparently, occurs with the declaration "I'm 'Wife'." Dobson claims that the new state is compared with the old as heaven is to earth, suggesting marriage effects a transformation from substance to ephemerality, from life to death. She also notes that the terms "wife" and "woman" get special attention through their enclosure in quotation marks. This, she says, emphasizes the lack of meaning in these terms (73).

However, the quotation marks also emphasize that these are not the speaker's words, but words borrowed from tradition, which Dickinson investigates and reveals through ironic treatment of their invested ideology. This reading

would change Dobson's argument somewhat, rendering the speaker in the poem already an alternative to the limited options of "little girl" or "invisible wife."[31] Furthermore, Dobson's reading ignores the ambivalence arising from the paradisal and eternal connotations of "Heaven." This ambivalence, or ambiguity, is a strong component of the poem, producing a subject that exceeds its signification.

In another poem that Dobson cites, Dickinson distinguishes "woman" from "wife", but in negative terms. That is, without the sign of wife, and without its associations with the living of a life in three parts (birth, marriage, death), she nevertheless lays claim to the highest title available to a woman.

> Title divine -- is mine!
> The Wife -- without the Sign!
> Acute Degree -- conferred on me --
> Empress of Calvary!
> Royal -- all but the Crown!
> Betrothed -- without the swoon

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[31] In fact, other alternatives were available to women, asin the successful careers of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott for instance. As well, these women were able to produce characters and personas which did not fit neatly into a stereotype, such as the impassioned critic of the contradictions inherent in the conservative ideology we find in Uncle Tom's Cabin, or the unorthodox female characters in many of Alcott's stories.

God sends us Women --
When you -- hold -- Garnet to Garnet --
Gold -- to Gold --
Born -- Bridalled -- Shrouded --
In a Day --
Tri Victory
"My Husband" -- women say --
Stroking the Melody --
Is this -- the way? (P1072)

Dobson comments on the poem.

> Yet "wife" is the highest "title" that society offers, and to become a "wife" does promise a mystical transformation, an opportunity to "ride the wind" as she has earlier said. Dickinson co-opts that transformation and at the same time both renounces and avoids the "swoon" by becoming the "Wife -- without the sign." (76)

Dickinson plays with the social convention inhering in the sign "wife". She forgoes the negative connotations in the sign, the missing sign here equated with tje absent male, and claims the status.

While Dobson's assertion that social pressures to conformity explain Dickinson's reticence cannot be dismissed, more is at work here than a simple hesitancy to expose herself. The poems Dobson cites demonstrate Dickinson's acute awareness of the treachery of language: the sense that the

words are not her own, that applied to her they define her in ways not congruent with her sense of herself. These poems also demonstrate an attitude of confrontation with those words and their connotations. Dickinson reveals their self-contradiction, their inadequacy to women's expression, and their oppressiveness. She situates herself in opposition to the stereotype of the male sign for woman, unlike many women who might internalize the sign and strengthen its discursive power. One can understand Dickinson's reticence, her strained and compressed syntax, her seeming idiosyncracies -- all as a means of combating a discourse that would define her stereotypically. We can see a struggle to name herself rather than be named by the other, a struggle that has far reaching ramifications. As "woman" and "wife" become problematic words for her, so too do "man", "he," "God," "nature," "you," and "I," as they all belong to an ideology that silences her.

So, Dobson's work is especially useful in answering those critics who would either categorize Dickinson's poetry as self-absorbed, detached from history, or connected to history referentially but obscurely.

> As a woman steeped in the literary conventions of a community of expression that encouraged women to write while insisting that they remain, in essence, silent, Dickinson was attracted to the stereotypes of the little girl and the wife/bride with which women attempted to circumvent the "gospel of silence" and fill the

> expressive void at the heart of nineteenth-century American women's literature. She was, however, uncertain of the adequacy of these figures to express the complexities of an adult woman's experience. For her poetry she takes what she can from them -- the pathos from the little girl and mystical transformation from the wife/bride -- and exploits the emotional options offered by those figures. (77)

By situating Dickinson's poetry in a cultural context of narrow proscriptive limitations, in which an awareness of the limitations nevertheless was present, Dobson shows the way to begin to read Dickinson as engaging closely a culture and its ideological assumptions.

Jo-Anne Fiet Diehl offers a similar approach in her discussion of the relationship between Dickinson and her Romantic predecessors (Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination). She argues that by placing Dickinson's poetry within the context of its literary climate, we can discover her commitment to her time, as well as begin to understand her sense of language as a system not necessarily from the heart. Dickinson focussed on that system, and wrestled with its proscriptions, and out of that struggle she developed an innovative representation of a subjectivity in process.

Clearly, to say "I," or to write it down, is to set the signifier "I" in relation to other signifiers, enter the symbolic, and posit the self as other. This other, for Emily

Dickinson, was already inscribed with nineteenth century American ideals of femininity -- to say "I" was to become "not I" in a more obvious way than her male counterparts would have understood. To reconcile that signifier with a signified leads to the recognition that the signified is "always/already" a signifier, a recognition that opens the way to its deconstruction. It is to recognize the "I" as intractably other -- to recognize the "I" as mask revealing not the self but itself, wherein the self falls irrecoverably into silence.

Into silence perhaps, but not powerlessness in Dickinson's most interesting poetry. An excess leaves its mark in the spaces, the refusals, the subversions-- exposing internal contradiction in the construction of the mask, while appearing itself as reticence. If she did not establish a clear identity, neither did she succumb to the invisible lady persona, writing herself out of existence. However personal her writing might be, and we must not ignore that her concerns are personal as well as public, it reveals less about Dickinson the woman than about the difficulties women generally find, or any marginalized group finds, in their struggle for acknowledgement within a discourse that devalues their experience.

What concerns me most here is the subject produced within the kinds of confrontation I have been describing. Dickinson's lyric subject is most interesting when most

threatened, for it is then that her poetry becomes most radically innovative. It is my contention that the split or fragmented subject one finds in a number of her poems results from her awareness of "internal difference,/ Where the meanings, are." However, any generalization about her poetry needs qualification. Many of her poems, if not most, enable us to construct a unified, stable subject position in many ways consistent with her Romantic predecessors. In other words, the voice that generates the poetry reveals itself in its uttering. The existence of these poems alongside more radical constructions must be attended to as they reveal an ultimate belief in such a subjectivity, however much under stress at times. As Susan Howe says, we must read all of Dickinson's poetry in order to understand any of it (My Emily Dickinson).

The poem, "Four Trees -- upon a solitary Acre," has been read generally as asserting Dickinson's skepticism and her rejection of Romantic ideology as well as of a divine presence in the world. The poem addresses the issue of coherence and design in nature.

Four Trees -- upon a solitary Acre --
Without Design
Or Order, or Apparent Action --
Maintain --

The Sun -- upon a Morning meets them --

The Wind --
No nearer Neighbor -- have they --
But God --

The Acre gives them -- Place --
They -- Him -- Attention of Passer by --
Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply --
Or Boy --

What Deed is Theirs unto the General Nature --
What Plan
They severally -- retard -- or further --
Unknown -- (P742)

Readings of this poem have varied. Cynthia Griffen Woolf sees it as emblematic of a universe in which "God is gone. Nature is random." She explains how syntactically the poem exerts a "kind of centrifugal force" that parallels a nature composed of disparate elements without a connection.

> The poem has no centripetal syntactic design: just as the contents of the scene bear only an accidental relationship to each other, so the most powerfully unifying forces that act upon the verse are the page that holds the poem, and the stanza and lines that assign words a place. (Emily Dickinson 461)

Without denying the unifying force of the page, stanza and line, I wish to draw attention to another stabilizing and

unifying force. A look at a couple more interpretations will, I hope, aid in isolating the element I am¬01626Xrefetring

Shira Wolosky says "Dickinson's syntax constitutes an integral part of her poetic meaning. The impulse of its disorders must be sought in the image of the world it presents" (Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War 2). So, the syntactic disorder expresses the speaker's perception of nature, where if God is present, he is not apparent in its design. The scene remains a collection of isolated objects that do not cohere in the eyes of the speaker. Wolosky's notion that the poem reflects, expresses or is structurally congruent with a view of nature that belongs to the speaker, seems already to posit a level of order and coherence that although not apparent in nature, is in the perception of it.

The poem seems to be essentially lyric, manifesting through its form the state of mind of the speaker. Wolosky and Woolf read this state of mind as radically skeptical, perhaps even nihilistic, but Christopher Benfey, in his book Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others, finds cause to interpret the tone as accepting of the "unknown."

> the absence of a "plan" seems less the "greatest ignorance" than a limitation of human knowing (and a liberating one);*p1016[illegible]atbe accepted. Who made the world remains unknown, but we are present at world-making events. (116)

Benfey, then, reads the poem as affirming an unknowable but

present force in nature, a presence that stands in relation to its manifestation in a much more complex and immediate way than simple observable patterns ("Perception of an Object Costs/ Precise the Objects loss" [P1071]).

We could understand this poem as expressing an idea similar to Coleridge's when he attacks Hartley's associationist theory in a letter to Southey: "I almost think, that Ideas never recall Ideas, as far as they are Ideas -- any more than Leaves in a forest create each other's motion -- The Breeze it is that runs thro' them / it is the Soul, the State of feeling --" (CL 961). Or in "The Nightingale," "... till the moon/ Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky/ With one sensation..." (Samuel Taylor Coleridge 101). The difference of course is that in Coleridge's thought the mover reveals itself in its manifestation, whereas in Dickinson the mover remains unknown. "Unknown" is the key word. Is this a lament, resignation, or acceptance? That too remains indeterminate as the various critical interpretations show. Clearly, however, the speaker expresses her state of not knowing: a state of mind, a stable position in relation to the apparent absence of pattern that lends the poem, if not nature, coherence. This coherence, as Lacan tells us, occurs along the syntagmatic line. Wolosky and Woolf argue that the broken syntax reflects a disordered world without coherence. However, the broken syntax seems to me more apparent than real in this poem.

However much compressed and strained, with its parts separated by dashes, the syntax for the most part adheres. The most problematic feature in the first stanza, for instance, is the absence of an object for the transitive verb "maintain." Or is it the subject for this verb that is missing? Do the "Four trees" maintain something or are they maintained by something? This ambiguity brilliantly evokes the sense of incomprehension on the part of the speaker. Yet while what holds the elements of the scene together cannot be seen, they are nevertheless together. Something unknown locates them, something irretrievable through observation.[32] This unnamed force gets evoked through the attention given to its absence.

The reason I argue against the notion that this poem radically subverts the dominant ideology is because while it mystifies the source of the image of the world, and refuses to name it, it nevertheless locates it as transcendent and indisputable. While the broken syntax tends to isolate semantic units, as I have said, the isolation is more apparent than real. A syntactic continuity persists into which the reader asserts him or herself and finds coherence, albeit in a condition of unknowing. A transcendent ego perceives the world from a clearly demarcated position relative to it. That

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[32] Dickinson's distrust of the eye has been beautifully illustrated by Mary Loeffelholz in Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory.

is, unknowing as the absence of knowing evokes the ego's presence.

The vanished or lost essence seems to be a recurring theme in Dickinson's writing. In spite of the difficulty of making any informed generalization about her work, one can find a clear preoccupation with the mortality/immortality issue. Her depictions and responses to that issue vary from the orthodox to the heretic. "Four Trees" for instance seems to promote the homespun belief in an intuited rather than apparent God. A poem such as "I taste a Liquor never brewed" performs an assault on a transcendent being reminiscent of Blake's "Nobodaddy," and so demonstrates that we should not take Dickinson's treatment of these issues too literally. We need to 93Xshiftthe emphasis somewhat away from poetry's serving life to life's serving poetry, from reference to composition, without stating the case too strongly. Death represents a state of mind, a vehicle for metaphor, as often as actual physical death. In other words it serves as poetic material for poetic concerns. A crucial poetic concern for Dickinson, as I've been arguing, was asserting herself into patriarchal discourse, within which the dualism inherent in the mortality/immortality issue was an integral component rich in possibilities.

At any rate, a presence seems to lurk about in much of Dickinson's poetry. Her response to it is ambivalent. This presence approaches slantwise, sometimes asserted positively,

sometimes negatively, sometimes welcomed but often feared. Sometimes it is constitutive, but often destructive: "Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell" (P1732). It seems to exist antithetically to the corporeal world, and this I think constitutes one of Dickinson's most radical departures from her poetic predecessors as well as from her contemporary intellectual climate. The natural world the Romantics created, the one naturalized in Coleridge's "Nightingale," Dickinson treats as a verbal construct that an antithetical presence dismantles. Benfey appears to allude to this:

> It may seem perverse to argue so, but I think Dickinson's life and person -- what is known or suspected about them -- have blinded readers to Dickinson's affirmation of the body. "The body is a soul," she is able to say in certain contexts (P1431). And what fascinates her in the resurrection, and compels her to turn again and again to the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, is the scandalous resurrection of the body. While the challenge to the skeptic is fairly obvious in the case of the resurrection of the dead, what finally makes Dickinson's case against the skeptic -- the skeptic within herself -- so compelling is her awareness of the role of the body in ordinary human experience. It is only an acceptance of the body and not a skeptical denial of it, that limits our sadistic rage for certainty. (Problem of Others 108)

Dickinson sees the world as discourse, and her entrance into it is as a repressed force demanding acknowledgement.

A popular, but still astonishing, poem enacts the conflict I am referring to.

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons --
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes --

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us --
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are --

None may teach it -- Any --
'Tis the Seal Despair --
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air --

When it comes, the Landscape listens --
Shadows -- hold their breath --
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death --

(P258)

Amongst others, Wendy Barker in Lunacy of Light: Emily Dickinson and the Experience of Metaphor and Cynthia Griffin

Wolff in Emily Dickinson, have explored Dickinson's light imagery, connecting it to authority and patriarchy. Significance coheres ambiguously, often paradoxically, around this imagery. Her speakers are variously drawn and resistant to this light; they see it both as oppressive and as offering a means of escaping oppression. This ambiguous response of her speakers shows itself especially clearly in the above poem. Traditionally the poem gets read as the expression of a state of despair which the imagery and allusions are designed to elucidate by reference to familiar experience. However, the associations developed with the light imply its source, which in itself turns out to be ambiguous. "A certain Slant of light" comes unbidden and apparently unwelcome but its departure is "like the Distance/ On the look of Death." The concluding lines can be interpreted either as that the light's coming kills, leaves death in its wake, or as that the light leaves its absence, like the "look of Death." I would argue this ambiguity evolves out of the attempt to elucidate the experience, that is, out of its metaphorical representation.

The light itself seems deathlike, cold and barren, coming on "Winter Afternoons." It "oppresses" and then becomes associated with "Cathedral Tunes" and gives a "Heavenly Hurt." The third stanza alludes to Revelations, implying an apocalyptic event. A power external to the body, it nevertheless leaves no scar, but effects a transformation

internally "Where the Meanings, are." This transformation, it seems, "'tis like the Distance/ On the look of Death." The oppressive presence drains the moment of all its meaning. Deathlike, the presence is not, however, precisely death, but light associated with death, as Cathedral tunes (dirges) are associated with death but are not death itself. As the poem describes this "Slant of light" it discovers ambiguity, insinuates an "internal difference" at its source. In a kind of reversal of the lyric mode's outering of the inner, the poem inners the outer in a loss of meaning, then internalizes that loss in the final stanza. In other words, it confuses the simple dichotomy of outer and inner, and the subject gets stretched across this confusion, losing its coherence in its expression. The power that the poem seeks to define disrupts signification. The power appears to be both life and death -- leaving death in its wake by the fact of its absence.

Dickinson's ambivalence towards a force that seems to exist in proximity, not logically but intuitively, creates an indeterminate subject position apparent in "There's a certain Slant of light" as well as many other poems. The force appears as both life and death giving, as both other and the same. In "I dreaded that first Robin, so" the coming of spring, the resurrection of nature, poses an inward threat -- "He hurts a little, though." This internalization threatens to catch her in its sight, "pierce" her with its foreignness. The fear in this poem seems to be a fear of a return to sense

experience, a return to consciousness. So the subject paradoxically finds awareness of herself in the "unthinking" other, and the resurrection becomes a funeral procession. In another poem

We learn in the Retreating
How vast an one
Was recently among us --
A Perished Sun

Endear in the departure
How doubly more
Than all the Golden presence
It was -- before -- (P1083)

The examples of this elusive presence, known through its absence, are far too numerous to mention. And although this feature of Dickinson's poetry has received considerable attention, and a variety of interpretations, I would like to argue one more in relation to the poem "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain."

This poem has been critically interpreted in both of the ways I alluded to earlier. Judy Jo Small, in her attempt to render Dickinson socially aware, connects it with a group of poems she believes are about the death of the young Amherst man in the civil war. In contrast, John Cody (<u>After Great Pain</u>), and to a lesser degree others, read the poem as

expressing a psychotic episode.[33] Either approach links the poem to a referent, and thereby evades a central issue.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading -- treading -- till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through --

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum --
Kept beating -- beating -- till I thought
My Mind was going numb --

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space -- began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,

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[33] Sharon Cameron, for instance, reads the poem psychoanalytically as an allegory of repression, but she does not claim any biographical referentiality. Cameron's interpretations of Dickinson are difficult to argue with, as is her premise that Dickinson's poetry reveals the impossibility of the lyric enterprise. Yet, I sense a residual essentialism in her work, evident in the equation of Romantic lyric with lyric generally.

And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here --

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down --
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing -- then -- (P280)

The first line resists simple interpretation, and casts a pall across the rest of the poem. A number of critics have noted the importance of Dickinson's opening lines and stanzas.[34] Frequently, as in this case, what follows constitutes an elaboration or elucidation on an initial conundrum. How does one feel a funeral? The indefinite article implies that this is not a particular funeral, but funerals in general, or even the general concept of the funeral as a public ritual performed over a death. So the speaker feels this sense of absence or loss. This metaphorically objectifies her inner

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[34] Northrop Frye, for one, writes that "what surprises in her work is almost always some kind of direct statement, sharpened into wit or epigram... Many of her poems start out by making some kind of definition of an abstract noun... and most of her best-loved poems are in one of the oldest and most primitive forms of poetry, the riddle or oblique description of some object" (Fables of Identity 202). Frye finds the success of this technique inconsistent in her work -- often simply mystifying rather than revealing; however his comments reveal his expectation of a clear reference, an expectation Dickinson resists.

state, which is the way the poem is usually read, namely as a representation of a mental collapse. The past tense, as well as the choice of the more clinical "Brain" as opposed to mind, suggests an emotional distance from the event, achieved through its objectification. Mastery over the emotion, it follows, constitutes mastery over the "I" as it coincides with the emotion. As the poem goes on to elaborate the metaphor, the mastery turns out to be both desired and oppressing. Eventually an excess of emotion not contained by the metaphor grows increasingly evident and alienated, painfully splitting the "I" off from itself. The metaphorical expansion in the effort to contain that which exceeds it[35] only heightens the conflict until expression itself breaks down, precipitating a fall into silence beyond knowing.

Elaborate funeral rites were a familiar occurrence in Amherst. As funerals are apt to do, they served to aid people in coming to terms with the fact of death and loss. Coming to terms generally means transcending, or negating death's

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[35] The strained and compressed syntax in Dickinson's poetry makes easy the detection of the influence of the metaphysical poets. In both we get the sense of tightly and precariously coiled objects of containment, on the verge of flying apart. Yet there is an important difference. Where the seventeenth-century poets typically sought to impose a form on an unruly universe or self which threatened to break down the order of the world (see Marjorie Nicolson's The Breaking of the Circle), in Dickinson's poetry it is order which threatens the self.

significance, through acceptance of some notion of continuance. People attempt to transform the absence into presence through ascribing a face to what is lost to knowing. The metaphor of the funeral in this poem clearly addresses this function and its untenability. The poem comments upon a social convention, and at the same time upon the lyric convention of outering the inner.[36] Appropriately, what the poem masks, what is lost, is the speaker, who we discover in the last stanza is the one for whom the funeral is performed. Like a funeral, the poem represents that which is absent, so as to make it present, but the process actually underscores its absence. It attempts to repress the fact of that faceless

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[36] See Paul De Man's interesting comments on prosopopeia in "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory." He recalls Saussure's notes on the term "hypographein" and his "adoption of the term, which by analogy, 'underscores a name, a word, by trying to repeat its syllables, and thus giving it another, artificial mode of being added, so to speak, to the original mode of being of the word.' Hypographein is close in this meaning to prosopon, mask or face. Hypogram is close to prosopopoeia, the trope of apostrophe. This is indeed compatible with Saussure's use of 'hypogram.' But prosopon-poiein means to give a face and therefore implies that the original face can be missing or nonexistent. The trope which coins a name for a still-unnamed entity, which gives face to the faceless is, of course, catachresis... . But it is possible that, instead of prosopopoeia being a subspecies of the generic type catachresis (or the reverse), the relationship between them is more disruptive than that between genus and species" (57).

source, which returns to undermine the representation. Actually, the masking seeks to hide the masking, repress the act of signification, which threatens to reveal its representation for what it is.

David Porter in his book, Dickinson: the Modern Idiom, sees the direction in this poem as a shift from a referential language to non-referential language, and argues that this is a characteristic feature of Dickinson's writing. He ascribes this tendency to a psychological source in Dickinson herself, resulting from her self-absorption and withdrawal. He says that "withdrawal into words creates the sort of surreal word-world that is figured in the fourth stanza ... . it is in the fourth stanza and the line that leads into it where we watch the language in the act of displacing reality. ... This is pure deixis, a reality that can be projected only in the world of language" (120). Yet Porter is still working off an expressive model. The poem can also be read, and I think more convincingly, as exploring the inadequacy of that model. Instead of revealing the internal externally (through at first its representation in realism, then abandoning that realism as inadequate, leading to a purely linguistic representation) the poem actually questions the representability of the internal experience. In other words it questions the possibility of the lyric as Romantic expressionism. What the poem traces is less a metaphorical representation of an inner life than the failure of representation. A "Plank in Reason" breaks, and the

speaker plunges through worlds designed to catch her. As the phenomenal world disintegrates, however, that which is beyond form and coherence intimates itself in the breaking.

Or, to state the matter with some theoretical underpinning: the "I" produced in this poem is not simply the split subject of the Lacanian "mirror stage," although that certainly offers some explanation of its production. The dialectic of self and other here moves beyond imaginary identification into confrontation with a symbolic code which fails to fulfil the desire for identification. The desire propels the speaker into increasingly more desperate representations, into metalinguistic metaphors that attempt to reveal the source of their own production which is lost to them irrecoverably. These steps through a familiar to an increasingly idiosyncratic, unrealistic, and cryptic imagery trace the movement beyond the effable. However, the ineffable functions within the poem, and in fact produces the crisis in the identification. Julia Kristeva appears to me to be arguing the importance of this pursuit in the following passage from her Desire in Language.

> I shall ...argue in favor of an analytical theory of signifying systems and practices that would search within the signifying phenomenon for the crisis or the unsettling process of meaning and subject rather than the coherence or identity of either one or a multiplicity of structures. (125)

In a poem such as "I felt a Funeral," it is precisely meaning and the subject that come into crisis. We get what Kristeva calls the "questionable subject-in-process." The subject, which moves towards meaning but does not end there, exceeds its manifestation. The stability of the subject depends upon the repression of this excess, depends upon the death of the subject as it coheres in meaning.

> Meaning and signification, however, do not exhaust the poetic function. Therefore, the thetic predicative operation and its correlatives (signified object and transcendental ego), though valid for the signifying economy of poetic language, are only one of its limits: certainly constitutive, but not all-encompassing. While poetic language can indeed be studied through its meaning and signification (by revealing, depending on the method, either structures or process), such a study would, in the final analysis, amount to reducing it to the phenomenological perspective and, hence, failing to see what in the poetic function departs from the signified and the transcendental ego and makes of what is known as "literature" something other than knowledge: the very place where social code is destroyed and renewed.... (132)

As Lacan tells us, the subject gains coherence and meaning along the syntagmatic line. Kristeva asserts that the transcendental ego "constitutes itself by predication -- by

syntax" (132). Dickinson seeks transcendence, but an excess (desire?) threatens it. Kristeva says

> Consequently, one should begin by positing that there is within poetic language (and therefore, although in a less pronounced manner, within any language) a heterogeneousness to meaning and signification. This heterogeneousness, detected genetically in the first echoalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, and sentences; this heterogeneousness, which is later reactivated as rhythms, intonations, glossalalias in psychotic discourse, serving as ultimate support of the speaking subject threatened by the collapse of the signifying function; this heterogeneousness to signification operates through, despite, and in excess of it and produces in poetic language "musical" but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself, that guarantee of thetic consciousness... (133)

Kristeva calls this heterogeneity the "semiotic -- a distinctive mark, trace, index, the premonitory sign, the proof, engraved mark, imprint -- in short, a distinctiveness admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer (for young children) or no longer refers (in psychotic discourse) to a signified object

for thetic consciousness" (133). It is "a disposition that is definitely heterogeneous to meaning but always in sight of it or in either a negative or surplus relationship to it."

The semiotic precedes signification, is located in the chora, the interplay of bodily drives in the pre-Oedipal state prior to their channeling in the symbolic. It can, of course, only be known through the symbolic, so is not quite what it is, but it remains as an antithetical element within language.

> ...though poetic language unsettled the position of the signified and the transcendental ego, it nonetheless posits a thesis, not of a particular being or meaning, but of a signifying apparatus; it posits its own process as an undecidable¬p1082Xpr[illegible]en sense and nonsense, between language and rhythm..., between the symbolic and semiotic. (135)

Both the symbolic and semiotic exist within signification. Within the development of the transcendental ego the semiotic gets repressed, within the "subject-in-process" the semiotic returns.

> If it is true that there would unavoidably be a speaking subject since the signifying set exists, it is nonetheless evident that this subject, in order to tally with its heterogeneity, must be, let us say, a questionable subject-in-process. (Desire 135)

Kristeva's theory offers us a means to articulate what happens

in a poem such as "I felt a Funeral," for as the poem "posits its own process as an undecidable" presence it strains to speak the ineffable. A convincing explanation for Dickinson's reticence then, her frequent refusal of clear meaning or clear reference, might be found in her acknowledgement of the ineffable. In other words her reticence marks a refusal to sacrifice the excess of the ineffable for the stability of a coherent, completed subject constructed within linear syntax.

Another poem where an excess asserts itself, subverting the disembodied self-contained consciousness, is "The Spirit is the Conscious Ear." As Mary Loeffelholz shows "the mediating incarnation of language deconstructs the authority of a self-present but humanly absent, disembodied voice --be it the voice of God the Father or the ideal Transcendentalist consciousness" (Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory 123).

The Spirit is the Conscious Ear.
We actually Hear
When We inspect -- that's audible --
That is admitted -- Here --

For other Services -- as Sound --
There hangs a smaller Ear
Outside the Castle -- that Contain --
The other -- only -- Hear -- (P733)

The tightly reasoned argument developing from the initial

statement runs into trouble when the language cuts across its assertions rendering them at least ambiguous, if not fallacious. The masterful tone, probing the matter, bringing its faculties to bear upon the elucidation of its own authority, discovers self-contradiction. The easy transformation of "Hear" to "Here", a reduction of a temporal phenomenon to a spatial one, from the auditory to the visual, so essential to Romantic poetics (as the previous chapter on Coleridge's "The Nightingale" illustrates), finds its support deriving from that which it would negate. That is, as Loeffelholz points out, the pair are alike in sound only, and different to the eye. The reasoning consciousness reveals its reliance upon puns, rhyme, repetitions and alliterative structures to make its case for the coincidence of the "mastering creative eye and the certainty of the bardic voice."

That mastery and certainty weaken further in the next stanza as the speaker somewhat anxiously pursues the argument. Now acknowledging "sound," it places it outside the enclosure of "here" in the "Not me" as Ralph Waldo Emerson would have it,[37] seeking still to isolate consciousness from its content. The "smaller ear" is for "other services" than the larger one.

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[37] "Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE." (Emerson 22)

Yet the smaller ear already intercedes in this logic through the obvious fact that the word is the same. The distinction separates the conscious ear from itself -- splitting ears? -- as the verbal wit intensifies, finally rendering the poem's conclusion formally strong but thematically ambiguous. As Loeffelholz points out, the subject of the verb "contain" is not clear. Is it the "Castle" or the "smaller ear" outside the castle? This syntactic ambiguity creates another -- to what then does the "The other" refer? And finally we must wonder if the speaker does not slip and say "Hear" when 'he' meant "here," inadvertently overturning his own argument.[38]

Likewise the subject position offered the reader gets complicated within the syntactic ambiguity. The here of consciousness may be the other of the last line, rendering here separate, outside the enunciating subject. The poem ends in the undecidability of an indeterminate subject position. Curiously, attempting to clarify that subject position, fix it within rational knowing, abstracts it from its roots in the production of language. But this is not news. We have already seen how Coleridge achieves this disembodiment. The difference in Dickinson's poem is an excess, a semiotic play, acknowledged, that contradicts rationalist claims, and lends

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[38] The temptation, as Loeffelholz puts it, of reading "the smaller Ear" as alluding to the clitoris, "her inner ear, as it were," is especially strong when we consider what male discourse renders absent here, and the disruptive effect of that absence in Dickinson's poetry.

the poem to parodic reading.

Easthope convincingly argues that iambic pentameter is inextricably linked with certain bourgeois assumptions. He credits T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound with giving it and its implicit ideology the "final heave." A dubious claim in regards to Eliot, it is less so with regard to the later Pound. Nevertheless, had she been taken seriously, Dickinson should have been seen as already showing the way. At any rate, Easthope elaborates how within the bourgeois humanist tradition the signifier loses its materiality, and the poem loses its sense of constructed object, in favour of the signified. Dickinson, using primarily three and four beat lines, as well as slanted rhymes and tight syntax, foregrounds the materiality of the signifier. But more importantly, and this is where she departs from her predecessors most radically, Dickinson's foregrounded language frequently undercuts rather than reinforces thematic development, as we have just seen in "The Spirit is the Conscious Ear." In other words, Pope's proscrip|ion, "The sound must be an echo to the sense," is seriously challenged here. The subjugation of sound to sense (see Easthope's discussion of phonetic iconicity in Poetry as Discourse 116-121, 129-132), parallels the subjugation of the material to the ethereal, matter to mind, body to spirit. Dickinson's confrontation with patriarchal ideology, driven by a need to render herself visible within its privileged discourse, shatters it.

Dickinson's ambivalence towards the power that exists beyond the veil is understandable given her historical context. As this power manifests itself in the materiality of language, its relationship to the physical is clear. How was she to reconcile this power with the eternal, immortal soul to which she was predispositioned to ascribe it? The power both empowers and threatens her identity, and it is for that reason one must read all of Dickinson, as well as recognize her poetic struggles as both personal and public. The semiotic in her poetry is occasionally a source of exhilaration or fulfillment, but rarely. Mostly, she could not give herself over to its terrible irrationality, but held it in an▪*p1956Xintense opposition to a need for rationalization.

In the previous chapter on Coleridge I argued that he sought through the lyric impulse of outering the inner the revelation of an origin contained in its representation, and that he aimed to canonize a particular version of self, one determined by Romantic ideology. The same lyric impulse informs Dickinson's most radical poems, but rather than reinforcing a continuity between self and other, and so stabilizing the semiotic, her lyric reveals a self absent from Romantic representations, an absence or excess that renders those representations questionable. Her suspicion of the "eye", the lie implicit in the transformation of the ear, frees the semiotic from ending in symbolic representation.

Where Coleridge could achieve the illusion of continuity

by eliminating what was discontinuous, perhaps only with mild discomfort, Dickinson could not. The Dickinson poems examined here reveal more profoundly the discontinuity between the speaking and the spoken than Coleridge, under very different ideological pressures, could ever have imagined. The enunciated "I" -- inscribed with the power and endurance of a lyric tradition -- offered Coleridge a sense of stability and a coherent inner life, while the enunciated "I" -- inscribed with nineteenth-century ideals of femininity -- offered Dickinson intolerable restrictions and denied her any inner life at all. The seed of skepticism we find in Coleridge grows in Dickinson to break out of the lyric form that germinated it.

Williams shares Dickinson's sense of words as other and, in the attempt to strip them of their power to overwhelm him, he even more radically tears apart the formal configurations of lyric subjectivity. While in many Williams poems there seems little left that might encourage us to call them lyric, we nevertheless do. Their lyric quality, like that of Dickinson's poems, and unlike the lyrics of most of Williams's contemporaries, derives from the desire to enter the world through promoting difference rather than conformity.

Chapter Four

"I must tell you": Williams and the Poetics of Engagement

"I myself seek to enter the lists
with these few notes jotted down in the
midst of the action, under distracting circumstances --
to remind myself of the truth."
(Collected Poems I.186)

"Imagination is what makes reality real to the mind."
(Denise Levertov in a footnote in
Breathing the Water 85)

James Breslin offers an attractive portrait of William Carlos Williams in An American Artist (1970), a book that still stands as one of the best introductions to the poet. He sees Williams as resisting the nostalgia for an absent, but more meaningful world, so evident in his contemporaries, particularly T. S. Eliot. Instead of lamenting the fragmentation and loss of coherence in modernity, Williams finds there a place to begin.

"The Wasteland" is a kind of anti-epic, a poem in which

> the quest for meaning is entirely thwarted and we are left, at the end, waiting for the collapse of western civilization. Paterson is a pre-epic, showing that the process of disintegration releases forces that can build a new world. It confronts, again and again, the savagery of contemporary society, but still affirms a creative seed. Eliot's end is Williams's beginning.
>
> (American Artist 202)

In this new world, according to Breslin, Williams values the commonplace, the little man, and he attacks pretension and hierarchy in so far as they block the recognition of the commonality of all people. We cannot help but feel that Breslin's reading of Williams would have appealed to the poet himself, seeking as he was a uniquely American idiom. We gain from Breslin a sense of an individual wishing to engage his community, as well as to function as local representative for that community in seeking to engage the larger world. But we also have the sense of an individual who understood his marginalized status: an artist in a community he perceived to be bent on material acquisition, yet someone who chose nevertheless to remain in that community in an era when "culture" was assumed to exist somewhere else.

However, alongside the figure of the man seeking contact with his world, Williams's concern with the poem as object, or "machine," and the word as thing, has led some critics to read his work as a form of aestheticism. In a book that carefully

studies the political climate Williams dwelt in during his early career, David Frail argues that Williams adopted an essential of American belief, namely the autonomy of the individual.

> He was a true believer in American individualism as Alexis de Toqueville defined it and I use it here: the assumption that one does "not belong to a group," be it a social class, a tradition-sharing solidarity, or an ancestry, and thus can "be considered absolutely alone." Even today the faith that one's self is constituted entirely apart from social structures remains the ground of American political discourse. (The Early Politics and Poetics of W.C.W. 5)

Frail argues that this belief lies behind Williams's attacks on convention, where it manifests itself in a powerful desire for freedom from social conformity. Social conformity in this sense not only annihilates individuality, but also interferes in the contact between individuals as equal but different human animals. According to Frail, the assumption of autonomy of the individual leads Williams finally to a kind of aestheticism, a detachment from the world he sought to engage. Even Breslin would seem to be arriving at a similar conclusion in an essay he wrote later on the artistic relationship between Williams and Charles Demuth.

> 'Reading' the works of Williams ..., we enter a world of hard, literal objects, yet a world that is detached from

> the 'real' world -- autonomous, self-referential, multidirectional, the world of the imagination." ("Cross-Fertilization in the Arts" 263)

And Williams himself would appear to have foreseen the danger.

> And if when I pompously announce that I am addressed -- To the imagination -- you believe that I thus divorce myself from life and so defeat my own end, I reply: To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force -- the imagination. (Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, hereafter cited CP, I.178)

Yet, while he appears to foresee the danger, it is not clear from this how he escapes it. It is clear, from innumerable declarations he made, that he wanted to. For instance, in Spring and All alone he writes:

> There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world
>
> (CP I.177)
>
> .....
>
> I am not in search of the beautiful illusion. (CP I.178)
>
> .....
>
> The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole -- aware -- civilized. (CP I.189)
>
> .....
>
> Composition is in no essential an escape from life. In

> fact if it is so it is negligible to the point of insignificance. (CP I.189)
>
> .....
>
> -- the illusion once dispensed with, painting has this problem before it: to replace not the forms but the reality of experience with its own --
>
> up to now shapes and meanings but always the illusion relying on composition to give likeness to "nature"
>
> now works of art cannot be left in this category of France's "lie," they must be real, not "realism" but reality itself -- (CP I.204)

Even in these declarations of contact with reality we might find an implicit naivety -- that notion that if you clear away convention, you arrive at reality, or if you remove all social influence you get to the true individual. This is, of course, the belief behind Coleridge's lyricism. But the point is that, unlike Coleridge, Williams assumes from the outset the detachment of the work of art, both from existents and author. It is through carrying aestheticism to the extreme that Williams escapes it and, I will argue, achieves the contact he sought with the world.

While, like Coleridge, William-p1446XCWilliams is drawn to origins, like Dickinson he is skeptical of what he calls the "beautiful illusion": consciousness or emotion figuring forth itself in "choral minstrelsy." His is the poetics of engagement rather than inclusion. His most radical and

sustained attack on the privilege of the inclusive Romantic lyric subject occurs in what might be called his middle career (as Marjorie Perloff persuasively demonstrates in her essay on Williams in The Poetics of Indeterminacy), which saw the publication of such texts as Kora in Hell, Spring and All, In the American Grain, The Descent of Winter and The Great American Novel.

This period is marked by an astonishing drive for innovation that becomes for Williams, so it seems, a value in itself. His writing during this time is often considered, even by the later Williams, as a search for his unique style, a foundation for more substantial works. But in an important way, this teleological perspective is misleading, in that it already assumes a Romantic vision, the development of a poetic form that follows congruently from a revealed origin. Likewise the Selected Poems produces a similar distortion, suggesting certain poems from this period were somehow representative of Williams's new form, whereas I intend to show his wholesale ransacking of form in this period is more concerned with evading form than with creating a new one. I suggest that placing these poems back in their context changes our reading of them, to the point where we start to see them not as means to an end, but as working attempts to escape the lure of endings altogether.

The sense of "working attempts" is especially strong in Williams's book Spring and All. There is nothing easy about

poetry for Williams -- it takes sustained hard work. The term "work" seems to me an especially appropriate one in Williams's case. "The Red Wheelbarrow," for instance, is a work in the same sense as one might call a painting a work. It also works, as we would expect a poem to do. That is, its parts contribute to an overall effect. But it seems to me a third sense of the term must be added in the case of this poem and others by Williams. That is, work as labour or production -- a verb assuming a subject different from the subject of the work, an engagement with the work that leaves its mark upon it, but is not contained within it. This quality in Williams's poetry I think reveals the discontinuities of transformation already revealed in the poetry of Coleridge and Dickinson, but I will argue that he, unlike the earlier two, enthusiastically exploits this discontinuity as a site of poetic language.

The unique freshness of Williams's poetry has been theorized in a variety of ways, but most critics tend to speak of presence or the abolition of subjective/objective distinctions. James Breslin reads the poetry as returning back to the thing itself through a pre-cognitive moment of perception prior to the raising of the object out of the physical world into the world of ideas. He says of "The Red Wheelbarrow:"

> With the disappearance of the poet comes a close focus upon the object: short, jagged lines and long vowels

> slow down our movement through the poem, breaking off each part of the scene for exact observation. ...This kind of crisp, intense lyric, in which self is dissolved into scene, is one way Williams had of constantly renewing himself. (54-55)

Carefully avoiding any preconceived notions of the thing, Williams, according to Breslin, compels his reader into experiencing the thing itself: "Any symbolic reading of the scene, a possible imposition by the observer, is carefully resisted; its hard, literal, objective reality is insisted upon" (55). This focus upon the banal "asserts by relief the primary color and novelty that are there." Similarly, with the retreat of the subject, the intensity of feeling derives from the sharpness of the perception of the objects depicted and not from associations the speaker might bring to them. In other words, the object of perception seems to fill the consciousness of the speaker, rather than consciousness imposing its form on the object. For Breslin, "renewal" derives from a return to material existence. "No ideas but in things," Williams proclaims, and thereby overturns what might have been the contrary Romantic assertion -- 'no things but in ideas.'

J. Hillis Miller goes further, asserting that "a primordial union of subject and object is the basic presupposition of Williams's poetry... [where] both the separate ego and objective world disappear... [and] the poet

lives the life of the object" ("Introduction" 6-7). Miller associates the reification of the object with the "word as object" and claims Williams offers a "concept of poetry which differs both from the classical theory of art as mirror held up to nature and from the Romantic theory of art as lamp radiating unifying light" (11). Rather, "the poem is made of things-- on a field," as Williams says, and Miller develops the point, arguing those things are words.

> ...but words, like other things, exist primarily as energies, directed forces. Words are nodes of linguistic power. This power is their potentiality for combining with other words to form grammatical structures. When words are placed side by side against the white field of the page they interact with one another to create a space occupied by energies in mobile tension." (12)

So Williams achieves a presence that is the presence of language, a presence of the present. Later, under the influence of deconstruction, Miller sees Williams's accomplishment as a kind of "present not present except in words," the presence of the intractable otherness of language (Linguistic Moment 381). Implicit here, as in Breslin, is a new vision of being, a place to get to, an end-oriented activity.[39]

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[39] See Gerald Bruns on "Negative Discourse" in Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language. The concept, as Bruns defines it, seems accurately to depict a frequent effect of

I think Joseph N. Rydell comes closer to what I'm after when he cites Wallace Stevens's complaint about Williams's poetics, namely that such a poetics leads nowhere. Rydell says

> It could very well be argued that the germ of Williams' poetics is contained in this debate, but at this point it is necessary only to stress the "field" or single "plane" on which self and objects mutually coexist in an imaginative category. The self and nature are different, but they occupy the same field, and are not defined hierarchically. Indeed, self and thing are identical only in relation of their reciprocal difference. In the imaginative category, each is a center or locus of intersecting forces. The field admits no fixed or locatable center, and thus no apriori subject. This, in effect, is Williams' new aesthetic which, as Stevens

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Williams's poetry: "Negative discourse...is a form of speech which attempts to isolate the act of signification from its results, that is, from the formation of a signified" (194). He goes on to say negative discourse "focusses on the moment before speech" for "by his silence man may return himself to the world of things, establish himself once more (in Heidegger's formula) as a 'being-in-the-world,' which is to say that through his silence he may once more establish himself in the immediate presence of the world" (200). Williams's Spring and All would seem to enact the nihilism of negative discourse, approaching the ground of being, but only in order to be 'becoming', beginning again, and only just beginning.

> foresaw, would demand incessant new beginnings, Williams' very antidote to the sterility of literature. (50)

Rydell reasserts the levelling of hierarchies, what Breslin calls the democratization of the poem, which decenters the poem. But unlike Breslin and Miller, Rydell speaks not of identification with the object, but of difference from it. In such a "field of action" nothing beyond the immediate can develop. For Stevens this constitutes the aesthetic's shortcoming, because to "fidget with points of view... leads always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility" (Rydell 49). But dwelling at the beginning is for Williams the greatest value. What is implicit here is not a new way of seeing, or being, but the necessity of repeatedly seeing anew. Or, in the terms I have been developing, the necessity of continuous transformation.

Marjorie Perloff elaborates on the concept of a "field of action" in Williams's poetry, focussing particularly on Spring and All, "a work so far ahead of its time that it was safely ignored until the sixties" (Indeterminacy 110). She reads the work in the context of Williams's fascination with Cubism as well as with the work of Gertrude Stein. She takes the title of her essay, "Lines converging and crossing," from Williams's essay on Marianne Moore:

> A course in mathematics would not be wasted on a poet, or a reader of poetry, if he remembers no more from it than the geometric principle of the intersection of loci:

> from all angles lines converging and crossing establish points. (Poetics of Indeterminacy 113)

The notion of points or "loci" arising from contending "lines" precludes identification. Contention illuminates Williams's work, not identification. Or rather, contention or difference contends with identification. Perloff's discussion of Williams's emphasis on the word as thing makes this clear. The word is not its referent, an identification Coleridge sought for poetic language, it is a thing in its own right. But this can be over-emphasized. As Perloff says, "pure abstraction was not the goal," but rather in the style of Stein, Williams places the compositional in a relationship of tension with the referential. Or as Miller asserts: "Williams has no fear of the referential power of words... This movement of the words together affirms simultaneously the reality of the objects named and the separate reality of the poem" (Linguistic Moment 378). So, as Perloff goes on to argue, the word, like the poem, exists in a metonymic rather than metaphoric relationship to reality. In the words of Williams: "the word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole -- aware -- civilized" (CP I.189). Through the emphasis on the word as thing unto itself, its relationship to its referent becomes one of engagement rather than identification.

Engagement assumes and exploits the discontinuity between the word and its referent, and likewise between the word and

its utterance. This engagement pervades Williams's poetry, in Spring and All particularly. While it works on the purely linguistic level, it also works on numerous other planes as well, composing the "lines converging and crossing" to form points. For instance, in another essay, Perloff, like many others, emphasizes Williams's concern with the visual aspect of the page, going so far as to argue it as a determinant in his versification (Dance of the Intellect 88-115). We should be wary, however, of privileging this aspect over the verbal, with which the visual contends. The ear does not get consumed by the eye in this poetry, and the speech event is not subsumed in the written text, but the two aspects exist equally and without continuity. And so in the constitution of the subject enunciation is not contained in the enunciated, but rather a difference is asserted in their engagement. An excess occurs on the margins of the discourse, incessantly redefining those margins, refusing the end.

This excess is clearly alluded to in poem No. VI from Spring and All.

No that is not it
nothing I have done
nothing
I have done

is made up of
nothing

and the diphthong

ae

together with
the first person
singular
indicative

of the auxiliary
verb
to have

everything
I have done
is the same

if to do
is capable
of an
infinity of
combinations

involving the
moral
physical

and religious

codes

for everything
and nothing
are synonymous
when

energy in vacuo
has the power
of confusion

which only to
have done nothing
can make
perfect (CP I.191-192)

It is difficult to find in this poem a clear reference. What do the deictics "that" and "it" refer to? "That" may be the previous poem, in which case "it" refers to what that poem fails to accomplish. But that claim assumes some goal, which is precisely what Williams repeatedly denies. The syntax of the first stanza further complicates meaning. While the poem starts off in an apparently linear mode, the phrasing soon becomes multivalent. The assertion about something he has not done quickly comes to potentially mean he has done nothing,

and then in the next stanza the reference becomes the phrase itself, made up of "nothing / and the diphthong / ae." But lest we get comfortable with metalingual levels of reference, Williams continues with "everything / I have done / is the same," apparently returning us to the reference of the first stanza -- namely the work he has done. But the status of the "I" is problematic. It operates as both signified and signifier. Miller tells us that in the poem "Young Sycamore" "it would be a mistake to identify this "I" with the man William Carlos Williams, however plausible and even irresistible the temptation to do so is" (Linguistic Moment 353). But in the poem under study here, at least, it would also be a mistake not to. The dual aspect constitutes an essential of the poem, as in the next stanza the play on the word "infinity" alerts us to the infinite verb form "to do," intending both the word and the action, fixity and flux, which carries over to consume moral, physical and religious codes in the same ambiguity. The "energy in vacuo," the contesting forces of syntax and reference, signifier and signified, motion and stasis, render "everything / and nothing" 4he same. Finally Williams returns us to the initial deictic ambiguity, claiming to have done nothing perfectly.

Miller tells us that Williams "begins his career with the abandonment of his separate ego" ("Introduction" 6). Yet if this poem is an example of language in action without the controlling presence of the ego, subjectivity is nevertheless

implicated. Just as the "energy in vacuo" derives from a contestation between signifier and signified, syntax and reference, so does it derive from a pull between, on the one hand, a luring along a syntagmatic chain towards meaning and , on the other hand, the disruption of that linearity by the material signifier. While clearly working against the notion of a transparent language, the poem nevertheless requires the referential aspect in order to produce the tension that energizes it. In that tension the presence of the material signifier alerts us to the process of signification.[40] Likewise the subject evoked in the "I" of "nothing I have done," the enunciated subject, contends with the enunciating subject, which asserts itself through a refusal of completion in the enunciated, a refusal both enabling and enabled by the resurgence of the signifier as unmitigatedly different from the signified.

Writing his biography years later Williams defined modernism as the move to an emphasis on the signifier.

> It was the making of that step, to come over into the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed that distinguishes the modern, or

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[40] Easthope interprets Lacan as saying "the attempt to close meaning along the [syntagmatic] axis offers a coherent position to the subject as 'a single voice' sustaining meaning and itself sustained in 'this linearity'" (69), and so, in contrast, the disruption of that linearity exposes the subject as a construct.

distinguishes the modern at that time from the period before the turn of the century. (Autobiography 380)

Yet certainly not everyone made the step as thoroughly as Williams. In spite of Easthope's belief, Eliot's writing retrieves neither the signifier nor signification, and even Pound seems to finally give the privilege to the presiding subject. In the movement which exerted its influence almost universally throughout the period, namely Imagism, two poems are frequently considered to be exemplary -- as if they were the same -- Pound's "Station in the Metro" and Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow." For my purposes, the differences prove more significant than the similarities.

IN A STATION OF THE METRO
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Selected 53)

XXII
so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white

chickens (CP I.224)

Pound's poem carries out his edict that the image is an "emotional complex in an instant of time" (Literary Essays 4). Two images are juxtaposed, each revivifying and enhancing the other. Each effects a reinterpretation of the other, moving towards an impression beyond that of either line individually. The impression constitutes a point-of-view, evoking an emotionally charged response to the scene. The poem actually expresses this point-of-view, this way of seeing that exceeds what is seen. All aspects of the poem conform to this expression. The "faces" are "apparitions in a crowd"; they are "petals" (color) against a black background. The dialectic resolves into a unified impression. Even the rhythms of the lines conform to and enhance the impression. The loosely anapestic meter characterizing the first two lines (counting the title) gives way in the last line to a series of strong stresses full of assonance, which further pick up the final alliteration, evoking a strong sense of resolution. In this way, while the line break neatly separates the two images, establishing a juxtaposition between differing impressions of the same scene, the last image gains the greatest power, and finally resolves the tension. As Williams says in Kora in Hell, the "Attention has been held too rigid on the one plane instead of following a more flexible, jagged resort" (Imaginations 14).

Williams's poem works differently. The whole of the poem

constitutes a single sentence. Yet if it were written as prose it would come to mean something quite different. It would become referential, claiming so much depends upon an actual red wheelbarrow; a statement not only lacking legitimation, but not even making a lot of sense. In Williams's versification the object itself, the "red wheel / barrow," is separated from the other elements which compose the image, and loses its centrality as the other elements gain centrality through their isolation in individual verses. Each component of the image acquires equal value, a value in itself apart from its contribution to an overall effect. In other words, the versification not only slows syntactical development, but fragments it.

The lineation furthers that fragmentation. Short, incisive lines emphasize the individual words -- compound words get severed across line breaks, which especially in the case of "wheel / barrow" serve to foreground the word as thing, broken, rather than a mere vehicle for enhancing an impression of a wheelbarrow. This results in an ambiguity between signifier and signified similar to that in "No that is not it." Rather than resolving the oppositions which compose this ambiguity, the poem hardens them. Furthermore, these oppositions invite us to reread the first stanza as similarly ambiguous: as object (rhetorical phrase) as well as expression of a point-of-view. In either case it functions as a discrete element in the poem's construction, enhancing the

image which follows in its assertion of value, which in turn legitimates that assertion. Rather than the image's serving to express a general impression or point-of-view, the point-of-view serves the image. The point-of-view implicit in the opening stanza functions as one element in the poem's composition; that is, expression becomes a rhetorical device in the poem's construction, rather than self-expression, allowing "the thing itself [to] emerge, liberating the man" (Autobiography 381). Giving to the words the same thing-like status as the referents separates the speaking from the spoken, asserts a difference where identification once reigned.

Where Pound's poem offers a subject constituted through identification with a coherently expressed feeling or impression, Williams conceives of a subject that distinguishes itself from what it has made, reveals itself in the fragmenting of syntax, its recognition of the intractable otherness of language as well as, metonymically speaking, the world of objects. Similarly the enunciating subject, the speaking, acquires materiality in its assumption of its difference from other things, in its engagement with a material world.[41]a

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[41] See James S. Hans's "Presence and Absence in Modern Poetry" for a very different reading of Williams, a reading I dispute here. For Hans, Williams "remains firmly a modern, steadfastly a poet who does not let the absence of language dominate his world, steadfastly a poet who still believes that

A refusal of the development along a syntagmatic line, the development which in turn determines that line, is a crucial element in this poetics of engagement. Engagement precludes the subject as center of the poem, and also evades generic convention, the discourse that would write itself. Poem No. I in Spring and All, is especially revealing in that respect: first, because it is, like so many of Williams's poems, a kind of allegory of its own creation, and second because it has interesting parallels with Coleridge's "The Nightingale," a true lyric as the Romantics have taught us to understand the term.

> By the rɔad to the contagious hospital
> under the surge of the blue
> mottled clouds driven from the
> northeast -- a cold wind. Beyond, the

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the function of language and poetry is to differentiate, however imperfectly, the undifferentiated experience which is the basis for all meaningful, creative human activity. He still believes in an experience which precedes and takes precedence over language, an experience which language must serve if it is to be creative..." (334). However, Hans does suggest Williams "middle period" was something of an aberration from that general pattern he sees. See also Stephan Cushman's William Carlos Williams and the Meaning of Measure which in a very thorough and interesting treatment of Williams's metrics nevertheless arrives at the conclusion that they are finally expressive and designed to reinforce syntagmatic development rather than disrupt it.

waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines -- (CP I.183)

As Breslin points out, "Eliot's end is Williams' beginning" (202). The opening of the poem reminds us of Eliot's vision of modernity -- a hodge-podge of fragments lacking coherence. The difference is that the fragmented culture of the "Waste Land" reverberates with echoes from a lost age, one that was whole and meaningful, thus evoking a longing for that absent meaning. Williams's poem conjures up no such longings. In fact, it is out of the absence of such longings that spring occurs. If the reader begins the poem with expectations of meaning, those expectations are soon exhausted. Without a hint of a development of any kind, desire is essentially annihilated, left with nothing to desire. If, as Lacan tells us, the subject is constituted from lack, then we have no subject here either. In that condition renewal can begin.

This also reminds us of the opening to "The Nightingale," where a series of negations clear the way back to a source in

nature, from which subjectivity once again burgeons forth as a natural manifestation. But while Coleridge's strategy is to create a lack then fill it, Williams negates the lack itself. Coleridge, then, participates in what Williams calls that "process of verisimilitude, that great copying which evolution has followed, repeating move for move every move that it made in the past." For Williams, that repetition "is approaching the end. Suddenly it is at an end. THE WORLD IS NEW" (CP I.182). In this prose section, which immediately precedes the poem, Williams tells us only the imagination is undeceived in this copying. The skeptical imagination recognizes that the subject will continue to repeat itself until it too has reached an end. And only out of its death will it be made new. Desire and ego, those things which can only incessantly repeat the forms of their production, can only be renewed through the destruction of those forms. If this begins to sound as though Coleridge simply did not dig deep enough, go back far enough in the search for a foundation in nature, and so remained caught in a signifying chain without an exit, while Williams discerns an escape to a pre-linguistic, more fundamental level, the poem demonstrates otherwise.

As Derrida makes clear, the alleged point of origin is a myth, it is "always/already" socially and linguistically constructed, and Williams acknowledges this both thematically and structurally in "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital." The "profound change" that occurs in the poem originates not

in nature, nor in a transforming subjectivity. Instead both nature and subjectivity are transformed through recasting the lyric form. First the form is transformed through the annihilation of the ego, then desire arises out of a verbal ambiguity, a literal splitting of the subject.

with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines --

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches --

The phonetic similarity of the words "leafless" and "lifeless," along with their visually similar appearance as words on the page, as well as their juxtaposition at the beginning of successive lines, leads us to read the "vines" as the noun for the adjectival phrase "Lifeless in appearance." But the phrase turns out to equally fit syntactically with the line which follows. The ambiguity continues throughout the remainder of the poem in the confusion over the antecedent for the pronoun "They."

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind --

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined --

It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

This syntactical slippage frees the signifier from its mooring in the signified, so that it takes on a life of its own, effecting a renewal of the perception of nature and concomitantly of the perceiving subject. Rather than discovering a basis for renewal in nature or subjectivity, a basis is found in the absence of origins outside the forms in which they are cast.

But now the stark dignity of

entrance -- Still, the profound change

has come upon them: rooted, they

grip down and begin to awaken

The "transition" of which Williams speaks in his autobiography, "from the concern with Hamlet to Hamlet the play," provides the ground from which awakening begins.

Surprisingly (it never ceases to surprise when it occurs) the ambiguity of reference also reveals a discontinuity within lyric. I say "surprisingly" because, at the risk of belaboring the point, lyric, as the term is most commonly used, seems to mean continuity between the speaking and the spoken -- the voice revealing itself in a seamless act of identification. Williams's poetry clearly will not be contained within this conception of lyric. Rather, it reveals the seams, the limits of genre, the boundaries of the linguistic subject, alerting us to an excess beyond them. A

speaker who is at once both Williams and a function of the poem's composition opens the way to unexpected transformations beyond the control of a presiding consciousness, outside. The origin becomes indeterminate.

But can one still call this lyric? Clearly not if we strictly observe the common understanding of the term, an understanding Williams undermines. This is not "utterance overheard" or "what one might say in a given situation." The silence implicit in such renderings of lyric, the hiding behind the mask, is precisely what Williams comes against. He demands to be heard, he cajoles, carps, yells -- at times his singing might sound more like a crow than a nightingale, but so be it. His voice, at least, reveals the discontinuity and ambiguity of its origin. And¶230Xsounds like lyric, although the entrance of an indeterminate origin radically upsets our expectations of lyric form.

One more poem. "By the road to the contagious hospital" is immediately followed by what in the selected poems goes under the heading "The Pot of Flowers." I mention this because the context is important and the poem is not meant to stand alone like a pot of flowers, but to become a point in a process of incessant beginnings and reworkings. In it the phenomenal world decomposes as the emphasis shifts over to the patterns of language used to describe it.

Pink confused with white
flowers and flowers reversed

take and spill the shaded flame
darting it back
into the lamp's horn

petals aslant darkened with mauve

red where in whorls
petal lays its glow upon petal
round flamegreen throats

petals radiant with transpiercing light
contending
above

the leaves
reaching up their modest green
from the pot's rim

and there, wholly dark, the pot
gay with rough moss. (CP I.184)

Williams's concern with the page comes into play here, as the drop from line to line parallels the drop of the eye from the top of the plant to its base. This might be interpreted as simple "copying" were it not for the fact that the copy acquires more substantial reality than the original. Assonance and alliteration abound, resisting the movement of the eye and its enslavement to the referent. Likewise, those same features resist the phenomenalization of voice that would turn the object into a reflection of the speaker's

consciousness, i.e. expressionism. Development of any single impression gets undermined by repeated new beginnings as the poem returns to the "flowers" and their "petals" again and again, each time in new terms. Shapes and angles form and reform as the pot of flowers acquires the fluid qualities of its composing: flowers are "reversed" "darting" "contending" "reaching." Until, as the end of the poem refers to the base of the plant, the connection has been made ragged, new.

Stevens's criticism that Williams's poetics leads to incessantly beginning again reveals a Romantic bias. The assumption is that the end of poetry is the same as the end of the Greater Romantic lyric, what Culler calls the poem itself being the happening, where "being-in-the-world" through creating an "imaginary" (in Lacan's sense of the term) world to be in is the goal.[42] In the chapter on Coleridge's "The Nightingale" I argued that this union of poet and world is in fact neither, but a profound absence of both, which informs the New Critical maxim that a poem should be, not mean. Like much of Stevens's own poetry, the poem exists for its own

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[42] See Bruns's discussion of Wallace Stevens as offering an alternative to the nihilism of negative discourse. "The mediating figure in this event [appearance of the world] -- the figure upon which the possibility of this event is grounded -- is the poet, or more precisely the poet-magus, who utters that primordial word which at once establishes the world in being and situates man as a being who dwells in the world" (Modern Poetry 219).

sake, out of this world.

The younger Williams, at least, was not satisfied with simply "being" but sought to engage the world through language and register an impact in it. This lyric quality may be traced back to Coleridge, and constitutes a very different line of influence than that inhabited by Stevens.[43] One of the characteristics of its development is a growing skepticism, the desire not "to be conned" as Phyllis Webb says. It has produced a poetry increasingly literal in its use of language -- Robert Creeley's is a prime example. But Williams's influence, and the influence of the tradition of which he is a part, has had an impact on poets as different from Creeley as Adrienne Rich or even John Ashbery. The list is long and rapidly getting longer but the poets on it share the desire to engage the world through language, rather than get off the world and be.

Williams is only partially successful. In Spring and All he discovered a way to engage the world and open the lyric "I" to its other. But once he got our attention he found, as Stevens suggests, that there was little he could say. In the

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[43] See Marjorie Perloff's discussion of this alternate tradition in her The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage. Her concerns are not specifically lyric, in fact her definition of lyric, which I address in my introductory chapter, precludes her discussion of the genre in the context of indeterminacy. Nevertheless she does discuss Williams's Spring and All at some length.

beginning, the words, the objects, have not yet learned to speak.[44] In Phyllis Webb's poetry we find a development remarkably close to the one I have been tracing up to Williams, but eventually she goes beyond him.

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[44] Charles Altieri seems to argue otherwise when he reads Williams in "Presence and Reference in a Text: the Example of Williams's 'This is just to say.'" Altieri perceives Williams as referring metonymically to larger social concerns than the ones simply or overtly depicted in the poem. For Altieri, the "plums" are not silent, but resonate with the whole issue of social contracts. See the allusion to "'ol Bill's plums" in Webb's Hanging Fire (65).

Chapter Five

Borders and Seams: The Transforming Poetics of Phyllis Webb

> "Raven, in the fact of being born, brings into existence his own mother. A process, creating its own antecedents and its own consequences, both at the same time. Needless to say, in this system there is no 'beginning of time,' there only exists the present moment. There is no creation, there is only transformation."
> (From the letters of Wilson Duff, as quoted by Phyllis Webb in "A Correspondence," Talking 139.)

> "a comment here about... the process, this passive process of awaiting the words, listening for the words. And then writing from them, responding to them, that it led me so much outside. This very inward, private process, led me more and more outside. It connected me, it associated me with the outside world."
> ("'Seeking Shape -- Seeking Meaning': An Interview with Phyllis Webb" by Smaro Kamboureli, 30)

> "in poetry...sound will initiate thought by a process of association. words call each other up, evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into utterance...a form of thought that is not rational but erotic because it works by attraction. a drawing, a pulling toward, a 'liking'"
>
> (Daphne Marlatt in "musing with mothertongue" as quoted by Phyllis Webb in an epigraph to Hanging Fire.)

"I am only a partial fiction," Phyllis Webb writes in the poem "Performance" (Hanging Fire 68). During an interview in the summer of 1991, Smaro Kamboureli asks her about that line. Webb replies: "I don't know that it's possible to be anything but at least partly fictional when you're writing. It is not life, it is writing. So there is no way this "I" can be totally me" (37). So, this is where we have come to: the "I" is a fiction, or as Benveniste says a construction of the moment in which "I" is written or spoken. "I" is other. Webb says of the "I" in "Performance" that it becomes much "more noun-like, much more object-like, and other" (37). And Douglas Barbour reads the "I" of Webb's anti-ghazals as "the object of poetic investigation, no different from any other object in the poem" ("Late Work at the Kitchen Table" 110).

But Webb writes "I am only a partial fiction" (my italics). And in a further gloss she goes on: "It's an artifact, a fiction, but there is enough truth, at least in

"Performance": there I am, standing up, reading the poem to the audience, and that's me" (Kamboureli 37). Brenda Carr refers to this ambiguity in her reading of "The Making of a Japanese Print," the last poem in Webb's most recent collection, Hanging Fire. She sees Webb as asserting a "both/and construction, an I and not I, in which her textual voice has floating and liminal attachment to a subjectivity experienced by the 'real' Phyllis Webb" ("Genre Theory and the Impasse of Lyric" 78). It seems that in Webb's most recent work enough of this attachment survives to create a dialectic between the urge toward identification with, and the recognition of, the "I" as other. Negotiating this dialectic has been the focus of this discussion so far, as it becomes increasingly clear that that dialectic constitutes the lyric subject.

Webb's writing proves especially interesting because after all her resistance to the conventions of lyric she still writes lyric. In spite of her references to the death of the lyric in the interview with Kamboureli, it is really the death of a modernist vision of lyric she is referring to, wherein identification is pursued for its own sake, the illusion of "being-in-the-world." As I suggested at the conclusion of the previous chapter, this "being," characteristic of Wallace Stevens's poetry as well as that of numerous others, is actually out of this world. It is a vision Webb has in fact always resisted. Like Williams, Webb seeks even in her

earliest work a means of engaging the world, albeit while grieving its loss. Unlike Williams, for whom the solution was always to begin again, Webb discovers a means of escape from "evolution repeating itself" that does not entail so much a new beginning each time as the engagement in an already old but transforming world. This is where she appears to be at in her most recent collection of poems, but even her earlier work reveals a continuous rethinking of the lyric form, a continuous transformation of lyric possibility.

Bakhtin claims that 'pure' genre lacks self-reference. The pure genre text shows no awareness of itself as made thing, and presumes an innocence or naturalness that exhausts its subject's potential.[45] The dialogic text, on the other hand, exposes an excess through parody or intertextuality that foregrounds form, making it an object of consciousness rather than its intrinsic quality.[46] Or, in Benveniste's terms the

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[45] These comments paraphrase my understanding of Bakhtin's thinking on the novelization of genre. Countless references could be cited. Especially to the point is his analysis of Pushkin's parody of lyric form in The Dialogic Imagination (43-48).

[46] See Pauline Butling's essay, "Paradox and Play in the Poetry of Phyllis Webb," for an example of the use of Bakhtin's theory in the reading of Webb's poetry. Or see Douglas Barbour's "Transformations of (the Language of) the Ordinary: Innovation in Recent Canadian Poetry," where Bakhtin is used as a means to articulating what is happening currently in Canadian poetry.

enunciated subject becomes an object for the enunciating subject, a signifier in a chain of signifiers whose referential status is always provisional. A holding back occurs, a refusal of full identification with the other, a reserve, or in Webb's words a "passive resistance." "I don't want to be conned," she says in her interview with Kamboureli (29). A vigilant skepticism informs all her work -- at first as a kind of lament for the failure of lyricism, and finally as a release from logocentric proscriptions.

"Lament," a poem in her first collection, Even Your Right Eye, published in 1956, already reveals a resistance to traditional lyricism. The poem works off an expressive model, revealing a state of mind that knows "everything is wrong," which evokes in itself the kind of despairing state for which Webb unfortunately has become noted.[47] The expressive model must inevitably fail, and clues as to the nature of that failure reside in the poem's self-deconstructing strategy. The poem begins in what Webb elsewhere describes as "the measure / the elevated tone, the attitude / of private man speaking to public men" ("Poetics Against the Angel of Death" The Vision Tree 60).

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[47] This is especially true of the early critical work done on Webb's poetry. See for instance John Hulcoop's "Phyllis Webb and The Priestess of Motion," or Helen W. Sonthoff's "Structure of Loss: The Poetry of Phyllis Webb," but especially John Bentley Mays's "Phyllis Webb (for Bob Wallace)."

Knowing that everything is wrong,
how can we go on giving birth
either to poems or the troublesome lie,
to children, most of all, who sense
the stress in our distracted wonder
the instant of their entry with their cry?

For every building in this world
receives our benediction of disease.
Knowing that everything is wrong
means only that we all know where we're going.

(Even Your Right Eye 36)

The assumption of common experience, or community, that establishes the reader in a shared understanding, enacts the "troublesome lie." It offers a subject position that the speaker soon recognizes as not I.

But I, how can I, I,
craving the resolution of my earth,
take up my little gang of sweet pretence
and saunter day-dreary down the alleys, or pursue
the half-disastrous night? Where is that virtue
I would claim with tense impersonal unworth,
where does it dwell, that virtuous land
where one can die without a second birth?

The assertion of "I" here functions as soliloquy, a turning aside from public address in an attempt to reconstitute self outside of a public voice that would engulf her. The shift in

pronoun manifests a withdrawal from shared community because it would erase her in a posture of commonality. In contrast, the loss of that shared community produces only solipsism and instability, as well as a desire for "that virtue / I would claim with tense impersonal unworth," as she seeks a land offering identification without excess, "where one can die without a second birth."

The concluding stanza closes off entry to the world in true Romantic fashion as the "I" of the second stanza withdraws from the poem in a return to public address.

> It is not here, neither in the petulance
> of my cries, nor in the tracers of my active fear,
> not in my suicide of love, my dear.
> That place of perfect animals and men
> is simply the circle we would charm our children in
> and why we frame our lonely poems in
> the shape of a frugal sadness.

Paradoxically, entering public discourse provokes an 896Xawareness of self as excluded; the voice shaped "in frugal sadness" is irrevocably other. The "lament" is for the unrealized wish for identification with the other, for completion in the lyric voice that says "I" -- that Romantic dream. But for Webb that dream is simply "the circle we would charm our children in."

Webb voices a similar lament in much of her early poetry, unable to reconcile an imagined utopia with her tough

skepticism. However, after her second book, and unlike her modernist predecessors, her attention turns increasingly towards the excess that torments the dream, and not to the dream itself. Much has been made of the impact of the conference in 1963 at U.B.C. on Webb's writing. But in her essay "On the Line" she shows that she was already seeking a way out of the "frugal sadness." She tells us how a growing concern with her own use of line breaks led to a discovery that eventually resulted in the Naked Poems. Upon hearing Charles Olson read, she says, she began to understand the line as breath unit (Talking 48), suggestive of its having an origin in the body, an idea which led to her remarkable long poem.

> I am thinking of the phrasing, of the measure of the breath, of what is natural to the phrase, and one of my efforts in writing the small Naked Poems was first of all to clarify my statements so that I could see what my basic rhythms were; how I really speak, how my feelings come out on the page. (Talking 47)

In poems such as "Lament," line lengths, phrasing and associations all contribute to the development of syntactical meaning, reinforcing a centralized discourse. In Naked Poems, however, the individual word gains new prominence as itself and not simply as an element in the building up of syntactical coherence. The resistance to linearity manifests an anxiety about the engulfing sentence, and an attraction to the word as

object.

MOVING
to establish distance
between our houses.

It seems
I welcome you in.

Your mouth blesses me
all over.

There is room. ("Suite I")

Although not clearly located, the deictics become specific, personal and very carefully delineated, gaining a value in themselves rather than solely, seemingly, as contributors to the rationale of logocentricity.

The language is used more metonymically than metaphorically -- that is, the material word displaces a kiss, text displaces the body producing an immediacy of contact. Point of view shifts around with the shifting contact.

AND
here
and here and
here
and over and
over your mouth ("Suite I")

The "I" of the poem locates itself in terms of personal

contact with a specific other, through immediate sensation, rather than through logocentricity. To further enhance the immediacy of sensation, narrative expectations, evoked perhaps in the opening pages of the poem, soon dissolve. The time of story gives way to the time of writing, to the present and to performance rather than narration.[48] Or for that matter, rather than expression as well, denying any expectations of traditional lyric.

Yet, an element of lyricism persists. Coleridge's lyric seeks a congruency between, to borrow Kristeva's terms, the semiotic and the symbolic, and so does Webb's poetic sequence.

> want the apple on the bough in
> the hand in the mouth seed
> planted in the brain want
> to think "apple" ("Some Final Questions")

Yet while Coleridge seeks identification with a lyric voice, a particular logocentric envisioning of nature and self, Webb seeks identification with detached, material objects and the sensations they give rise to. The difference is one of emphasis and subjugation. Coleridge seeks legitimation of the poetic voice, which results in subjugating the semiotic to the symbolic, while Webb emphasizes the performance of the

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[48] For a clear expectation of the distinction between story time and the time of writing see Culler's "Apostrophe" in The Pursuit of Signs, page 149, or Gerard Genette's Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, page 27.

semiotic, and refuses symbolic subjugation.

Nevertheless, while not assuming the posture of "private man speaking to public men" but an "I" addressing a particular "you," Webb enacts a withdrawal from the world into an enclosed space, protected, where intimacy is possible because the threat of the other is removed. Like traditional lyric, the poem seeks to isolate and reveal its origins in the world, but unlike Romantic lyric at least, it does not close itself off from those origins in the process. Rather, in the words of Robert Kroetsch, it attempts to isolate a "dwelling at and in the beginning itself," closing itself to the teleology of predetermined form.[49] The poetic sequence attempts to isolate that moment before entrance into the symbolic. It is a tenuous and defensive posture (as the questioning in the last sequence of the poem reveals),[50] made possible by the fact

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[49] See Robert Kroetsch's "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem," which begins: "In love-making, in writing the long poem -- delay is both -- delay is both technique and content. Narrative has an elaborate grammar of delay. The poets of the twentieth century, in moving away from narrative, abandoned (some willingly, some reluctantly) their inherited grammar. Poets, like lovers, were driven back to the moment of creation; the question, then: not how to end, but how to begin. Not the quest for ending, but the dwelling at and in the beginning itself" (Lovely Treachery of Words 117-118).

[50] See Webb's essay "The Question as an instrument of Torture" (Talking 31-45). Also Brenda Carr's essay "Genre and the Impasse of Lyric," which picks up on Webb's ruminations on

that "you" are silent --sensed rather than heard.

TONIGHT
quietness. In me
and the room.

I am enclosed
by a thought

and some walls.
. . . .
I people
this room
with things, a
chair, a lamp, a
fly two books by
Marianne Moore.
. . . .
YOU
took
with so much
gentleness
my dark ("Suite I")

Robert Kroetsch says the line in Naked Poems reveals a poetics of anxiety. And Webb writes that Duncan reads the short line

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the power of the question in order to grasp her sense of "passive resistance" as a poetic strategy.

as "candor," but she says it is also terror (Talking 70 and 67 respectively). The candor can be seen in the desire for intimacy with the word, and the anxiety/terror in the fear of the word's being consumed by the sentence that negates the word's material presence, its difference as sound and shape. The disruption, the halting of syntax, the increasingly indeterminate deictics, foreground the associations of sound, typology and image, which in turn reveal an order that is not syntactical and transcendent but rooted in the present moment of contact with the text.

> I hear the waves
> hounding the window:
> lord, they are the root waves
> of the poem's meter
> the waves of the
> root poem's sex.
> The waves of Event
> (the major planets, the minor
> planets, the Act)
> break down at my window:
> I also hear those waves. ("Non Linear")

Outside the present moment she hears the other as other gender insisting: "The Great Iambic Pentameter / who is the Hound of Heaven in our stress" ("Poetics Against the Angel of Death" The Vision Tree 60). Although the "waves of event... break down" against her emphasis on the now of writing rather than

the now of story, she hears them nevertheless. Those other waves, the "root waves," are the more attractive and insidious lyric waves. She sustains her presence against them by her minimalist, minute and evasive performance, refusing subordination to the code.

Now you are sitting doubled up in pain.
What's that for?

doubled up I feel
small like these poems
the area of attack
is diminished ("Some Final Questions")

So, in Naked Poems Webb moves outside the public to discover the personal. These small poems reveal not a figuration of the personal within the public, the clicheed lyric figure, but the performance of what gets excluded in that figuring.

Cecilia Frey argues that after Naked Poems Webb sought to reconcile her feminist poetics of intimacy with a masculine poetics of structure. These categories seem to hold in Webb's own understanding of the failure of her "great masterpiece," the "Kropotkin poems." Her "Foreword" to Wilson's Bowl apologizes for the dominance of male figures in her poetry. In her interview with Smaro Kamboureli she recalls that her grand design probably never came to fruition because of her growing resistance to designs and utopias. The transition from a retreat from the world to a reconciliation with it

proved impossible, and ultimately it may be seen as a failure of the Romantic belief in the continuity between enunciation and the enunciated, or in Lacan's terms a failure of the imaginary.[51] Webb seems finally to arrive at not reconciliation but dialectic.

In the "Foreword" to Wilson's Bowl Webb solicits Barthes' aid in articulating the difficulty inherent in her idea of "the good masterpiece."

> "I am both too big and too weak for writing. I am alongside it, for writing is always dense, violent, indifferent to the infantile ego which solicits it." I was so grateful to Roland Barthes when I discovered that passage in A Lover's Discourse because it so perfectly describes my relationship to writing, and I don't think I could ever myself have explained the blood-line with such precision.

"Blood-line" seems an especially apt metaphor for the relationship as I understand it, and as I've argued Williams understood it, suggesting a material contiguity that equally

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[51] I have argued that the seed of doubt regarding the the continuity between enunciation and the enunciated, or the identification with the other, is already there in Coleridge's writing (see my concluding remarks in Chapter Three), reaches crisis proportions in Dickinson's poetry, until the belief is finally abandoned in Williams's work. In Williams, as in Webb, relinquishing that belief was part of the dramatic change in his poetics from what had gone before.

implies similarity and difference. Writing has a life of its own that will not relinquish its otherness. For Webb, you solicit the "incredible fire" at your peril. Mastery is out of the question. But writing is also inadequate, a cage too small.

> is there a shadow following the
> hand that writes
> always? or for the left-handed
> only?
>
> I cannot write with my right.
>
> I grasp what I can. The rest
> is a great shadow. (Wilson's Bowl 13)

The problem for the lyricist is the shadow created by the hand that writes -- an excess produced by any resolution, which in turn renders that resolution suspect.

> To be reconciled with the past
> is redemption but unreal as hell
> if you can't recall the beginning
> and of time, who can get back there? (14)

The desire to reconcile the past with the present seems to produce an impasse. The choice is between getting caught in the inevitable lie/line or relinquishing the hope of resolution altogether. In spite of what Coleridge believed, the continuity cannot be found. Reconciliation creates a "shadow," the...

Insurrectionary wilderness of the I
am, I will be, forcing the vision
to something other, something out
side the sleep of dreams riddled
with remembrances. (15)

The "good masterpiece" in which the body politic and love's body are "interchangeable polymorphous analogues" (Wilson's Bowl 9) refuses to realize itself.

What gets realized are borders that may be crossed but never removed. Crossing the borders produces new borders, cutting the transgressor off from her origin: "who can get back there?" (14).

Shall I tell you what I do to pass the time
here on the island at night?
There is red velvet and purple velvet.
I cut out diamonds from a pattern piece
by piece. I sew two pieces, one purple
one red, together, attach another making designs
as I go. Mapping it into some kind of crazy
poncho. I am absorbed in the fitting together
of pieces. Troika the white cat watches.
Red velvet on purple purple on red colours
of the mystic and revolutionary. (18)

And she gets called on it: "The cat jumps in my lap. She stares."

In Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti-Ghazals, Webb

clearly relinquishes the grand design and explores further the possibilities of the geno-text.[52] What results is a collection of exquisite lyrics that are at the same time anti-lyric, "sliding lyric tone against the lyric grain" as Douglas Barbour says ("Late Work" 110). As opposed to the "grand design," these poems, in Webb's words, "tend towards the particular, the local, the dialectical and private" ("Preface," Sunday Water). What this amounts to is a clear inversion of Coleridge's poetics, where the here and now of writing gets represented, located and fixed within a linear history. Webb alternatively assembles particulars of memory and historical time in the indeterminate present, where those particulars have no past, but originate in that present. The particular, the private and the local come to be synonymous with the now of writing.

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[52] See Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, pages 86 - 89. "The geno text can thus be seen as language's underlying foundation. We shall use the term phenotext to denote language that serves to communicate, which linguistics describes in terms of 'competence' and 'performance.' The phenotext is constantly split up and divided, and is irreducible to the semiotic process that works through the genotext. The phenotext is a structure (which can be generated, in generative grammar's sense); it obeys rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee. The genotext, on the other hand, is a process; it moves through zones that have relative and transitory borders and constitutes a path that is not restricted to the two poles of univocal information between two full-fledged subjects."

The links between couplets and pages are multiple and unpredictable. All kinds of linking are permitted, none privileged. Truly, "what does not change is / the will to change," as Webb suggests in "The Poems of Failure."[53]

I watch the pile of cards grow.
I semaphore for help (calling stone-dead John Thompson).

A mist in the harbour. Hydrangea blooms turn pink.
A game of badminton, shuttlecock, hitting at feathers!

My family is the circumstance I cannot dance with.
At Banff I danced in Black, so crazy, the young man
insisting

Four or five couplets trying to dance
into Persia. Who dances in Persia now?

A magic carpet, a prayer mat, red.
A knocked off head of somebody on her broken knees.

(Water and Light 9)

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[53] Webb is quoting, no doubt, the opening line of Charles Olson's poem "The Kingfishers" (Collected Poems 86). Olson in turn acknowledges his debt, later in the poem, to Heraclitus:

Not one death but many,
not accumulation but change, the feed-back proves, the
[feed-
back is the law
Into the same river no man steps twice
When fire dies air dies
No one remains, nor is, one

Appropriately, "Sunday Water" opens self-referentially (we are told in an endnote in The Vision Tree that Webb wrote the anti-ghazals on unlined file cards). The "pile of cards" appears to grow of its own volition, while "I watch" helpless. Soliciting her muse, whose ghazals preceded hers, and as though cast adrift (she uses semaphore) on the anxiety of influence, she seeks some control. Notably the muse is absent, the origin indeterminate. She grabs at particulars, "hitting at feathers" and drifts into a series of associations beginning with the family she cannot "dance" with, leading to Persia, the origin of the ghazal, and ultimately the image of the murdered woman under a fundamentalist regime. As always for Webb, and perhaps women generally (see Dickin{gn), soliciting a genre poses dangers.

Escaping the danger means focussing on the particular, the local, and the private, as she had already learned to do in Naked Poems. But in the anti-ghazals the anxiety present in that earlier sequence recedes, as is apparent in the longer line, the countless allusions, as well as in the adoption of a form with a tradition. It seems the line, the allusions and the form become parts of the poems' construction without taking over. The associations that develop are not those that genre or tradition demand, but personal ones that cut across our expectations producing surprising leaps. So, while the world gets acknowledgement, it is Webb's world, and in that familiar space she can relinquish control and drift, without

the threat of drowning in a sea of influence.

The pull, this way and that, ultimately into the pull
of the pen across the page.

Sniffing for poems, the forward memory
of hand beyond the grasp.

Not grasping, not at all, Reaching is
different -- can't touch that sun. (18)

Carried in "the pull / of the pen across the page," language conjuring language, the speaker awaits the discovery that the hand reaches after. Grounded in the material, in the metonymical relation of language and the body, the "blood-line," she finds the connections between the particulars of the local, what is present. Even what is beyond the local gets absorbed into the here and now of writing, although this is very different from the inclusiveness of egocentricity.

Heidegger, notes of music
in his name.

The rose blooms because it blooms in the trellis.
A scale of black death because a scale of black death.

Around me, little creakings
of the house. Day's end.

The universe opens. I close.
And open, just to surprise you.

Come loves, little sheep, into
the barricades of the Fall Fair. (10)

Rather, it is an inclusiveness born of kinship. That kinship constitutes the personal, and its dispersal across the particulars of the present here and now. Not Heidegger, then, but Heidegger in the moment of his inscription, a name on the page lacking any origin beyond that. So it is with all the particulars in the poems, they are there because they are there. That is their kinship.

The ghazal form itself comes to constitute one of the particulars of the poems, originating not in Persia centuries ago, but in the moment of their being written. Rather than shaping the moment of writing, capturing it within its linear developing tradition, the now of writing shapes the ghazal. Significantly, however, it is the ghazal which facilitates this shaping. And this is a point we will have to return to, for I believe lyric is open to the same possibility.

One last issue needs to be dealt with at this juncture on this speedy tour of Phyllis Webb's poetry. Just as other particulars in the poems have no origin beyond the fact of their apprehension in the now of writing, the "I" too is without an origin beyond the present. As Barbour says, the "I" is not the ego/center of the poems, but just one more element in their construction. It shifts and changes with each leap of the imagination, investing this particular then that, carried finally by "the pull / of the pen across the

page" (Water and Light 18). Nevertheless, the "I" comes to identify with the now of writing rather than anything beyond that moment, and so shares the inclusiveness as well as the indeterminacy of the now.[54]

What is clear is that Webb grapples with the discontinuity I've been tracking in the lyric. It is her continuing exploration of that incongruity in her latest book that makes that book especially interesting here, and particularly important in the development of the lyric. Negotiating the boundary of lyric closure, opening the window to let in the noise of the traffic outside, has been a concern of Webb's all along, and one riddled with potential dangers. That concern undergoes continued interrogation in Hanging Fire. However, this time, as she is quoted as saying in Cary Fagan's review in Books in Canada, there is an "emotional difference": "there is a lot more outright anger" that is "not masked as despair" (Fagan 23). These "ugly poems," as she calls them, have little of the delicacy of feeling, much of the exquisite sound patterning, and less of the¢*p366Xl defensive posturing characteristic of a lot of her work. Here, the poet takes on, rather than retreating from, or seeking reconciliation with, the discourses of history and

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[54] Webb's technique here might productively be compared with Coleridge's in "The Nightingale" where he too shares the inclusiveness of the now of writing, but attempts to locate that now outside in historical time and thereby draw all time into the present.

patriarchal ideology. For all of these reasons, I assume, Webb herself sees these poems as anti-lyric.

However, as Fagan has noted, even when Webb writes about history or revolution or Lenin, she writes about her relationship to them. The "I" still figures prominently. It is the relationship of the "I" to those other texts that most engages us. But I think Fagan is mistaken when he comments that the prose poem, "To the Finland Station," constitutes a "seamless blend of the personal and the historical." Actually, Webb's writing in that poem, as in the others in the book, emphasizes seams and borders: between the personal and the political, self and other, word and referent, lyric and what is outside lyric.

> I watch as the train pulls past unmoving box-cars sprayed solid and lurid with grafitti, but what the words say I don't know. The countryside's sparse and lovely. I try to see it with Lenin's slanty eyes, blinking. Did it look very different in April, 1917?
>
> (Hanging Fire 43)

These seams produce the kind of fragmentation so apparent in the collection, where clear edges mark the differences and preclude the ego's desire for seamless (i.e. Romantic) inclusion.

It will be useful at this juncture to note a distinction between William's poetics as I have attempted to describe them in the previous chapter and Webb's at this point in her

writing. I argued that in Spring and All Williams dwells upon beginning, evokes the moment of creation at the instant before anything is created. He writes that poetry is a matter of "wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted about them or taking them bodily from greasy contexts" (Imaginations 315-316). Implicit in this poetics is the figure of the poet actively creating, compelling the word back to its pristine beginnings. Webb, alternately, accepts the word as it comes to her, laden with ideology, its own speech, like computer icons that when tapped unfold layers upon layers of programming. She refers to her allusive habits as a kind of shorthand (Fagan 21). They act as hieroglyphics for worlds already existing. Tapping them accesses texts, histories, ideologies and lives that enter the poem crossing all the other sub-texts evoked by other signs. The inevitable effect of such a shorthand must be that no single sign or its allusion gains precedence, but each is opened and closed in the leaps from one to the next. One might expect the result of this to be mere random confusion, except for a "sub-rational rationale," an erotics or attraction that it seems the business of these poems to reveal. Webb inserts two epigraphs at the beginning of the collection which help to elucidate this concept.

> "in poetry... sound will initiate thought by a process of association. words call each other up. evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into utterance... a

> form of thought that is not rational but erotic because it works by attraction. a drawing, a pulling toward, a 'liking.'
>
> Titles of poems in quotation marks are 'given' words, phrases or sentences that arrive unbidden in my head. I've been tracking them for some time to see if there are hidden themes, connections, a sub-rational rationale. It seems there are.

The first quotation is from Daphne Marlatt's "musing with mothertongue." The second is by Webb herself and, as she comments to Smaro Kamboureli, implies an inner process. But in that interview she goes on to say it unexpectedly led her outside (30). The first quotation perhaps helps explain that, especially in the notion of words evoking each other, "nudg[ing] each other into utterance." These words would seem to speak for themselves. The attraction, the seduction, of those words and their utterance has long been a central concern for Webb. In Naked Poems she wants to "think apple," and in Water and Light she explores that "blood-line" further. But in both those cases the other is silenced out of the desire for self-presence through identification. In Hanging Fire that desire is tempered by the awareness that self-presence is only possible through the failure of identification. While Williams's poetry implies an understanding of this, it also reveals his inability to get

beyond it.

we're coming in
to Williamsland
to invade
the objects
to snatch the
after-image of
ol' Bill's plums -
you know -
the ones that
tasted so good
because they were
cold and beautiful
and couldn't
speak (65)

Unlike Williams who must clear away messy contexts in order to achieve the silence in which to make it new, Webb listens carefully to the racket of conflicting voices. Webb's "plums" are not silent. She allows them their speech, just as she allows all the allusions to carry their own associations into the poem's construction. In tracing the erotics of attraction a non-linear shaping of meaning arises, a criss-crossing and intersecting of sub-texts.

The effect is startling and reciprocal. Through allowing the excess of the voices implied through allusion, their contexts far exceeding their signification, Webb allows

herself a similar excess. And this I think is where Webb's comment that the turning inward led finally outside becomes especially inciteful (pun intended). The unbidden words and phrases in her head might reveal a subconscious pattern of attraction, but in order for that tracking to be accurate, the poet must acknowledge their otherness; she has to (h)ear the distinctiveness of each and every one of them in its own disparate voice; she must relinquish control. Furthermore, relinquishing that control not only allows other voices to speak in her poetry, but as well releases Webb from the cage too small.

The title of the poem "Passacaglia" is one of those "unbidden words" to which she listens for its part in the pattern of attraction. The long and graceful word is attractive in itself. It is a term for a slow and sombre seventeenth and eighteenth-century piece of music constructed on a ground bass, and is sometimes used to refer to the accompanying dance as well. The poem which follows could not be more appropriately titled. The word evokes connotations similar to conventional lyric: the slow, sombre construction on a ground bass. Her attraction is evident in the body of her writing. But as Webb allows those connotations, that tradition, to speak, she disassociates herself from it, and escapes¬p606Xlyricsure.

The poet dives off the deep end
of the lyric poem to surface on

Nevsky Prospekt in Leningrad
on a hot June night (46)

The third person reference to herself seems symptomatic of much of Webb's writing here, and of the fragmentation throughout the book. The reference to "Nevsky Prospekt" locates "The Poet" in a place that metonymically evokes history as well as geography. But only as a tourist. The connections between "The poet" and her location are marked by difference: "missing her friends who ought / to be here in the hot night / walking up Nevsky Prospekt." The absence registered in the locating is of the same quality as that implicit in the idea of the poet who writes herself in the third person. And the effect is similar to that of a Williams poem where the acknowledgement of difference keeps the poet alive and distinct from the objects of perception, engaging them without identification. But unlike the objects of the Williams poems I have discussed, these objects are not silent, not cut out from greasy contexts and cleaned, but instead carry whole ideologies along with them. This constitutes a much riskier undertaking for the lyric poet.

The voices words invoke, as Webb has often claimed, hold a fascination for her, but also threaten to silence her by invoking monologic systems that exclude her. Here, her voice will not be silenced by those voices, nor even the representation of "The poet," as she speaks across rather than through them, disrupting them.

she has broken her habit of
repetition, the snowdrops,
the snowdrops, the snowdrops
in the white nights, white
nights, white nights, the
death of the lyric poem
the death --

Enunciation and enunciated split into contradiction, producing an excess similar to that of the reference to "Nevsky Prospekt," a reference evoking a history, a revolution and a man far exceeding the sign that evokes them. The poem's seemingly arbitrary stop seems also to imply a movement beyond closure, beyond the "death" of closure. It furthermore, in its ambiguity, raises a crucial question. Do the last two lines mean the lyric poem murders, or do they mean the lyric poem is dead. Either reading gets undermined by the gesture beyond closure. Either the speaker escapes murder, or the lyric poem escapes death. It is the linking of these alternatives that most intrigues me now.

Images of "escape" or "passing out of" occur repeatedly in Hanging Fire and especially in the last section of the book, entitled "Scattered Effects." The "Pepper Tree," for instance "finds ecstatic form by changing places. / It changes places" (58). Or in "Cue Cards," that by now familiar but elusive cat once again escapes inscription: "and another Rousseau, Henri, / paints stripes on a large cat / as it

royally passes through customs" (62). In the "Cat & Mouse Game," even more clearly "The cat steps over / the rules of the game / he, she, it crosses ..." and finally:

I exit the scene
paring my fingernails.

The field surges behind me
with fun & names
disrupting the bloody text. (66)

The last poem in the collection, "The Making of a Japanese Print," enacts a passage to a "new dispensation." Brenda Carr's reading of this poem, and especially its conclusion, is truly illuminating. First, the conclusion:

A woman emerges at last
on the finest paper, cursing
his quest for the line
and this damned delicate fan
carved in her hand
to keep her forever cool
factitious, apparently pleasing. (78)

And now, Carr's reading of it:

> While this woman is stamped with the appropriate icons of femininity, the imprint does not succeed at exiling the subversive female subject to the block [pun on printmaker's block]. For the duration of two words, the voice of Harunobu's courtesan and the poet/speaker merge, as the descriptive "cursing" slides to the oral spoken

> "this damned." ...Letting the Japanese woman off the block may be read as an allegory of the female poet/speaker transgressing systems of gendered representation: hand in hand, they escape in excess of the imprint and lyric closure. (Carr 77)

The merging Carr refers to translates as identification. As I've been using that term, it implies a coincidence of the enunciated and enunciation, within which enunciation is actually lost. What Webb accomplishes here, as Carr makes clear, is identification that disrupts the enunciated at the moment it occurs. The speaker, in effect, identifies with the representation in the instant of its disruption. Like the allusions which gesture far beyond their representation, Webb's subjectivity too exceeds the instance in which "I" is spoken.

From the beginning, Webb's poetry belies an awareness of what lies beyond generic form. Even her earliest poems do not share the modernist angst over a world which will not conform to a neat aesthetic order. Her despair derives instead from an art that can only lie, forever condemned to personal and social irrelevance. That despair wanes as her poetry becomes increasingly more postmodern, as her focus shifts from seeking a congruity between world and poem, self and other, to exploiting the difference. Influenced by the Williams tradition, the preoccupation with the instant of engagement with the world, she moves beyond Williams's need to create the

world new, towards engaging worlds already existing -- worlds transforming out of that engagement. In this context "I" is both the subject of discourse, the subjectivity produced syntactically, the enunciated subject, as well as Webb the poet, the referent, who disrupts that syntax by exceeding its authority, who indifferently, sometimes angrily or disdainfully, turns her back on its assumed power, and walks across its "puny boundaries,"[55] identifying finally in the disrupted instant in which I says "I."

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[55] The phrase, perhaps surprisingly and perhaps not, is from Wordsworth. "Thou art no slave / Of that false secondary power by which / In weakness we create distinctions, then / Deem that our puny boundaries are things / Which we perceive, and not which we have made. / To thee, unblinded by these outward shows, / The unity of all has been revealed" (Prelude 1805 II.76). Wordsworth, speaking to Coleridge, envisions an inclusiveness, creating precisely the boundary Webb crosses out of.

Conclusion

It
all drops into
place. My

face is heavy
with the sight. I can
feel my eye breaking.
(Robert Creeley, "The Window"
Collected Poems 284)

The word must be put down for itself, not
as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant
of the whole -- aware -- civilized.
(W. C. Williams Collected Poems 189)

It goes without saying, but I'll say it nevertheless, that my readings of these poets do not constitute definitive or even complete renderings of their poetics, for it is clear now that each new recitation of lyric transforms what has gone before, as the instances≤201Xof reading Dickinson alongside Coleridge or Webb alongside Williams make especially apparent. Reading Dickinson leads us to the discovery that the skepticism which tears apart her lyric is already there in the

writing of Coleridge. Reading Williams helps us to recognize the otherness of language in Dickinson's work. Reading Webb compels re-readings of Williams, which leads to the recognition that his words have been silenced in their service of the image. It is equally true, as Webb's work shows, that each new book by an author invites new readings of her or his earlier ones. Reading Hanging Fire, and its movement beyond inclusiveness, against Webb's earlier collections, reveals that getting outside has always been for her a source of attraction and trepidation. Subverting a convention exposes the convention in what has gone before. New readings of all these poets will and should be made as new recitations of lyric occur.

If, finally, we are no closer to a definition of lyric, that is as it should be. The business here has been to explore ways out of the limitations tradition imposes on lyric, not to reinforce them or produce new ones. How many lyric conventions does it take to make a lyric? And which ones are the most important ones? It seems to me such riddles cannot and should not be answered. Presuming to answer them is a dead end, spelling the death of the lyric, the life of which depends upon transformation.

Yet, from this highly tentative position, we can look around and see just how tentative it is. I have argued that the lyric tradition revealed in the poetics of Coleridge, Dickinson, Williams and Webb attends to what is outside

closure, and that lyric's evocation of what is outside actually disrupts closure. If we listen closely enough, we can hear what is outside -- it is I speaking, and it changes things. Even in the poetry of a Yeats or an Eliot, in their fear of what lies outside -- we can hear them speaking. Webb, and countless others, some of whom I will consider in a moment, have trained our ears to hear.

In Coleridge we hear the desire to know tempered by the need for stability. His "The Nightingale" would seem to conform to the definition offered by Perloff, where lyric is "a short verse utterance (or sequence of such utterances) in which a single speaker expresses, in figurative language, his subjective vision of 'truths of moments, situations, relationships,' a vision culminating in a 'unique insight' or epiphany that unites poet and reader" ("Lyric Impasse" 173-4). It meets the expectations of Sharon Cameron's understanding of lyric in which lyric vision is "many moments distilled into the one" (Lyric Time 207). It reflects de Man's theory that lyric attempts to conceal the fact that it is lyric and not a real voice speaking ("Lyric Poetry" 55). Coleridge posits a seamless continuity between the personal and the public, within which the truth of the human condition, for all time and for all people, is revealed. Yet, although he asserts again and again his unshakable faith in the "naturalness" of such constructions, his inability to prove them disturbs his Romantic flight. His writing seems haunted by what lurks

outside the imaginary, as he alludes to the "eternal mystery" he seeks relentlessly to demystify.

It is my argument that the social pressures of the Romantic period produced the need for a sure footing, while lyric offered the means and the end. That is, lyric's evocation of what lies outside its form provided the paradigm for social stability. But lyric, as recent recitations of it show, creates its own origins. Lyric, then, came to reinforce the dominant ideologies and became almost inextricably linked to them. It was a powerful conjunction, and those who practiced it would gain in stature and importance, while those who resisted or questioned it would be, like Coleridge, assumed to have failed as poets or even as persons.[56]

Dickinson, who resisted the conjunction of lyric and the dominant ideology, was perceived as quirky and patronized as

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[56] It has been argued that Coleridge's failure is what has made him most interesting for many people. See Marilyn Butler's Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: "It is no accident that so much of the response to Coleridge in the 1820's was personal, and that (for example in the remarks of Hazlitt, De Quincy and Carlyle) it contained so acute a sense of Coleridge as a personal failure. That sense of frustration and of despair was as necessary for his hold on the sympathy of his fellow-intellectuals as was the inspiration proffered by his self-generated solution. Coleridge represents our idea of the artist in its modern variant, and it appears to be necessary that he should be tragic: neurotic, displaced, the Hamlet of out times, an appropriate culture-hero for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (92-92).

a kind of psychological curiosity. While Sharon Cameron, in correcting that point of view, asserts that Dickinson's poetry attests to the inevitable failure of lyric, I would argue it reveals the failure of the dominant patriarchal ideology to coincide with the lyric form of address. In Dickinson's fractured syntax we hear the failure of the reconciliation of the personal and the public, that Romantic dream.

Williams's drive back to the beginning, his wholesale ransacking of the ideology attached to lyric, amounts to a pursuit of an origin that is not simply the creation of its offspring, but is origination itself. The origin turns out to be the act of creating origins, which necessitates a perpetual deconstruction to the point where construction begins. Integral to the process is a similar cleansing of language, so that it shares the qualities of things as they exist in a pristine state before meaning attaches to them. Yet Webb's writing reveals to us how Williams's poetics imply a form of control not so very different from that which assumes that the meaning words acquire is determined by their origin in the ego which solicits them. That assumption of mastery, as we have seen particularly in the Romantics, results in being mastered. So Williams, through his control, silences words, and in the process silences himself. We hear that too.

Webb's Hanging Fire opens our eyes and ears to how it is unnecessary to control a text, as the text deconstructs itself. And in fact relinquishing that control releases her

from the text's control and enables her to enter and exit through fissures it produces. By giving back to the things and words as things their own speech, she regains hers. We become aware that origin never determined the text, and once having reached that recognition, we discover speech need not determine origin either. It is in that dialectic, fueled by the concept of an indeterminate origin, that lyric transforms itself.

As I said, Webb has trained our ears, but so have others. No one listens more acutely than Robert Creeley, for instance, and he demands the same of us. His line breaks evoke the actual speaking voice, conforming neither to syntax, meter or even the visual page.

One more day gone,
done, found in
the form of days.

It began, it
ended -- was
forward, backward,

slow, fast, a
sun shone, clouds,
high in the air I was

for awhile with others,
then came down
on the ground again.

No moon. A room in
a hotel -- to begin
again. ("Again" Collected Poems 422)

For someone who owes much to Williams, his poetry is still very different. Williams's dictum -- "No ideas, but in things" -- does not appear to apply here. Words are not anchored in things, but are things themselves which do not evoke other things so much as ideas. We are asked to listen, rather than see: "It began, it / ended -- was / forward, backward, / slow, fast, a / sun shone, clouds, / high in the air."[57] When we listen we hear the words speak, and rather than speaking through them, that is soliciting them to express an inner subjective experience, Creeley traces the moment of engaging those speaking words. Like the day depicted, the speaker is caught up in form without the power to determine its outcome. The "I" placed ambiguously between "high in the air" and "for awhile with others" lacks substantial location except in words. Yet the absence of that substantiality evokes its necessity, in the need to "begin / again." It is

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[57] See Marjorie Perloff's essay "'To give a design': Williams and the visualization of poetry," in The Dance of the Intellect, 88 - 118. She argues the importance of the visual impact of the print on the page in Williams's versification and lineation.

to be found in the evocation of voice.[58]

This voice is not de Man's phenomenalized voice, for there is no pretence in Creeley's poem of the presence of a real voice. Rather, the poem evokes and intensifies our awareness of the absence of real voice through alluding to it metonymically: through line breaks, punctuation, thinking and feeling a way through sound and rhythm. The obvious (should be) difference between the poem and an actual voice remains in the foreground, and in fact the focus of the poem. So one might say that Creeley's poem is about the lyric moment -- not the resolution of what is inside lyric form with what is outside, but the dialectic between the two, making that the very condition of the poem's speaking. Likewise, words in this poem, and in most of Creeley's poetry, do not ensnare or determine their reference, but allow excess. This gives to the "I" the same quality, which disrupts closure, necessitating beginning again. As in Webb's poetry, the moment at which "I" exceeds its representation, when enunciation disrupts the enunciated, when the poem evokes

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[58] Dennis Cooley's intriguing distinction between "eye" and "ear" poetry curiously associates lyricism with "eye" poetry (Vernacular Muse 1-21). This claim finds justification in most Romantic lyric, but again I would argue that the association derives from the development of lyric within Romantic ideology, and not from the genre itself. Actually, the genre could more easily be argued to have its roots in music rather than the image. Orpheus charmed Hades with his ability to make beautiful sounds and not beautiful pictures.

rather than imitates actual speech, is the moment which "I" speaks.

The lyric evocation of what is outside opens up possibilities for creating new form, as many contemporary practitioners make apparent. Sometimes what is outside enters as kind of crosscurrent, interrupting the flow, seeking location.

I thought it was you but I couldn't tell.
It's so hard, working with people, you want them all
To like you and be happy, but they get in the way
Of their own predilections, it's like a stone

Blocking the mouth of a cave. And when you say, come on let's
Be individuals reveling in our separateness, yet twined
Together at the top by our hair, like branches, then it's OK
To go down into the garden at night and smoke cigarettes...

(John Ashbery, "Night Life" in Shadow Train, 29)

Or, sometimes, unexpectedly, even the lyric convention of "the many in the one" can be exhumed and drawn on for its power, the power in which Wordsworth and his followers wrapped themselves.

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths

in which

our names do not appear. (Diving into the Wreck 24)

In this poem, Adrienne Rich evokes the power of the communal voice, in order to empower those marginalized by the dominant ideology. She exploits lyric's capacity for creating its own origins, and thereby seeks to find a voice for herself and women generally, one that looks to replace the patriarchal communal voice, and assume its power. Later in Rich's poetry the development of a "common language" becomes more complex:

We aren't virtuosi

or child prodigies, there are no prodigies

in this realm, only a half-blind, stubborn

cleaving to the timbre, the tones of what we are

-- even when all the texts describe it differently.

("Transcendental Etude" Dream of a Common Language 74)

The speaker starts to envision "a whole new poetry beginning here" that "has nothing to do with eternity," a "pulling the tenets of a life together / with no mere will to mastery."

Sometimes evoking words and listening to what is outside returns the language to a kind of referentiality without the determinism: "trees" refer to trees, which are much more than our evocation of them, much more than we intend.

where language & landspace meet

flickering

before the eyes the shift

of grains of windblown

snow

an utter

fade

into

what opening out

is all around 'us'

there

that white

(Douglas Barbour, Saskatchewan Night, 23)

In this poem lyric functions like one of its words, evoking what is outside and precluding determinacy. Words evoke their referent -- the reference escapes the determination of the word which evokes it. In that escape each word is made new and never the same as any before. Likewise for the pronoun "I" and the lyric evocation of it, an excess disrupts determinacy -- "I" means as I does.

Lyric's evocation of excess brings the genre into conflict with ideologies based on dominance and control. Through its capacity to transform itself and adapt to changing ideology lyric evades the closure of monologic systems. It evokes what is outside such systems, other voices, and seeks the fulfillment of desire in the production of excess. It "finds ecstatic form by changing places. / It changes places" (Hanging Fire 58).

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